

**ENGS 119—Advanced Writing: Poetry**  
Fall 2010 T TR 10:00–11:15 Lafayette L107

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T TR 11:30–12:30 & appt.

This course is meant to help you become a better writer of poetry, a more reflective artist, and a more self-conscious reader of poems. We'll roll up our sleeves and manipulate the raw verbal materials of poetry, and we'll consider a variety of occasions for poetry (the reasons why a certain thought or argument might belong in verse, instead of in prose).

There are two common ideas about poetry writing that we will be deliberately working against. The first, that poetry is merely about “expressing yourself,” we will counter with a consistent imperative to describe an external reality and to communicate clearly with an unknown reader. The second misconception, that poetry is just a spontaneous effusion of inspiration, we will combat with a serious practice of revision and with exercises designed to stimulate writing in the absence of the muse, who is imaginary after all.

Poetry is both a sensory and an intellectual art, having to do with both aural pleasure and considered meaning—*sentence and solace*, as Chaucer formulated these principles so long ago, or “the moral law” and “the opposing law,” as Wallace Stevens describes them. We'll try to honor both of these imperatives in our discussions.

### **TEXTS FOR THIS COURSE**

#### Required

*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, shorter fifth ed. (Ferguson, et al.)\*

Karin Gottshall, *Crocus*

Maurice Manning, *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*

Maurice Manning, *Bucolics*

A single-author book of “collected” or “selected” poems\*\*

#### Recommended

Davidson & Fraser, *Writing Poetry: Creative and Critical Approaches*

A serious dictionary\*\*\*

\*Everyone in the class should own a copy of some fairly serious historical anthology of poetry in English.

The assigned anthology is good, and I will key our Tuesday reading assignments to its page numbers. (The complete edition, by the way, is almost twice as long for not much more money.) There are lots of other anthologies that would also work, if you already own one, but if you don't, the *Norton* is at the bookstore for you.

\*\*Each member of the class will be working with a *different* complete or collected anthology. You'll sign up for these in the first weeks of class.

\*\*\*You will want to have a dictionary on hand while you read and while you write. I've asked the bookstore to order some, but I'm not sure whether they did it. I recommend the *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., but any dictionary with etymology will work.

## CREDO

This course is based on a few fundamental ideas about poetry. If your ideas about poetry conflict with what I articulate below, I would ask that you suspend your assumptions for some time and consider these guidelines while we pursue the work of this semester. Even if your definition of the art is different from mine, the exercises of this course should help you write better poetry in your own mode when the semester is over. But here are my basic assumptions:

1. Poetry is an artistic medium. Like any medium, it is constrained by its materials. (Consider the ways that painting, as a medium, is constrained. Or the very different ways that film or theater is constrained.)

2. The materials of poetry are verbal. Words and sentences are useful to the poet both for their meanings and for their sounds. Poetry differs from other verbal art in the kind of attention it directs to its materials: by writing poems instead of novels, poets implicitly ask their readers to pay more attention to nuances of sound and meaning.

3. Words have conventional meanings, as well as conventional sounds. The literal sense of a sentence is in the words and the relations between them, not in the mind of the writer. (For this reason, other people are often better readers of our poems than we are: they only see what's in the sentences, not all the things we wanted to put there.)

4. The poem "happens" when it is read (either aloud or with the kind of attention that's paid to something read aloud) not by the author or a special performer, but by the ordinary intelligent reader. When the poem works, it is a transaction between the text and the reader, not an unmediated connection between author and reader.

5. Like any artistic medium, poetry has a tradition that informs the perceptions and understandings of the intelligent reader (or audience). Just as you couldn't give a new CD the title *Let It Be* or *Thriller* without raising certain expectations for the listener, poetry creates its context in part by reference (straightforward, oblique, or general) to the works and categories of previous writing. The structures and materials of your poems will all already have some fingerprints on them. An informed reader will understand poems in part through their interactions with the traditions they invoke.

6. The writing of poetry, like the practice of any art, is a skill. It can improve with deliberate and reflective practice; it can profit from informed and thoughtful revision. Although spontaneous outpourings are sometimes successful, many hours of exercises and training underlie the best instinctive maneuvers. (For comparison, consider the practice that supports an effortless layup on the basketball court, or a jazz solo.)

I don't mean to suggest that a poem can't be a very personal utterance; I only mean that a good poem will not be *only* personal. Like any other works of art, poems exist in a public way, and they are fashioned things. This course is meant to be about that practice of fashioning.

Please note: everything you write for this course is potentially public, at least within the bounds of the seminar. I may ask you to circulate or share anything you were going to turn in, so remember that other people will be reading your work.

## YOUR WORK FOR THIS COURSE

Your responsibilities in this course will be different from those in most of your other English classes. You will be doing a small amount of writing (one or two poems) every week. You'll also be able to contribute to the reading assignments each week. And once we settle in to writing, you'll be preparing responses to your classmates' poems for a weekly workshop.

Each week, we will have some shared reading set by me, to give a sense of that week's writing assignment. You will also have the option to contribute a poem in the same vein to Tuesday's reading—something you've hunted up by browsing in your anthology or your single-author collection. I will keep track of these contributions and factor them into your class participation score (see below). I'll need to get these electronically and in advance (by Monday morning), so plan to start your weekly reading early in the weekend.

On Thursdays (starting Feb. 11), we'll have workshop: five or six volunteers will circulate their responses to the weekly assignment and receive constructive feedback from the class. These poems also need to be distributed in advance—Wednesday at noon is soon enough—so that your classmates can have informed rather than merely spontaneous discussion. Plan to email them to me as PDFs or .doc (MS Word) documents so I can upload them to Blackboard.

Everyone should be able to workshop three times.

Your assignments will be graded on a numerical scale:

- 9 or 10: Nicely satisfies the terms of the assignment.
- 7 or 8: Adequately fulfills the assignment.
- 5 or 6: Misses or misconstrues the point of the assignment.
- (+0 to 3 points for quality of the poem, regardless of the assignment.)
- (-1 point per day late.)
- (-½ point if it's not up for workshop and I have to print it.)

In practice, this means work submitted on time will get a mark between 5 and 13. After February 11, you may skip one weekly assignment with no penalty; if you don't skip one, I'll drop your lowest score. At the end of the term, I'll add these numbers up to get a total score at the end of the term, and use that to resolve your letter grade for your writing, which is one half of your overall grade for the course.

The other half of your semester grade will come from your participation in the seminar: regular, prompt, prepared, and alert attendance; contributions to a classroom atmosphere of practical inquiry; interesting contributions to the Tuesday reading; and constructive feedback offered in workshop. That's not an insignificant investment of effort, and that's why it plays such a large part in your grade. Please note: bored or unprepared attendance is really not much better, in my book, than skipping class.

If you are taking ENGS 119 as a senior seminar this semester, you'll need to complete one additional piece of writing at the end of the term: an essay on the poet whose collected works you're exploring. The essay should be 10-12 pages long, and should consider some aspect of the poet's style, or his or her approach to one or more of the genres or occasions we're considering in class. Please consult with me monthly about this in office hours. This essay will be a third equal factor in your semester grade.

## REVISIONS

We'll talk more about this when the due dates get closer—in fact, we have a whole week devoted to the topic of revision—but you should keep in mind that there are four moments in the semester when revised poems are due:

Feb. 11 (1 revision)  
Apr. 1 (2 revisions)  
Apr. 15 (2 revisions)  
May 4 (4 revisions)

Don't let these dates sneak up on you. On all but the first date, there are new poems due on the same day. If you want to work on the same poem through multiple revisions, that's okay. When you submit revisions, you will also turn in the marked-up, commented-on copy of the previous draft(s), so please don't lose / discard / soil poems when you get them back.

## ACADEMIC HONESTY

I probably shouldn't have to say this, but I'm going to say it anyway: all the work you submit this semester *must be your own work, written specifically for this class*. It's true that it's relatively common for writers to borrow (or “steal,” as T. S. Eliot famously put it) from each other, or to take inspiration from each other. Often that means imitating well-known poems, or borrowing a structure or a phrase from a poet who is a strong (and acknowledged) influence. That's fine to do (I even encourage it, if it's done well), and we're bound to see that sort of borrowing in our reading this semester.

You should know, however, that I have zero tolerance for plagiarism. If you submit someone else's poem as your own work, you will be delivered to the Center for Student Ethics & Standards, without any further warning, and will most likely fail the course. I don't expect this to be a problem. If you're curious about whether a particularly aggressive swipe counts as plagiarism, consult with me before you commit it.

## A NOTE ON THE ADJECTIVE “CREATIVE”

Please note that I understand *creative*, in the term “creative writing,” to have more to do with *making things* than with “outside-the-box” solutions. In the past I've had a handful of students who were interested in thwarting each week's assignment rather than exploring the opportunities it opened up. Please don't dodge the challenge of doing something interesting within the constraints of the assignment. As you'll see, none of these occasions for verse has been exhausted. You may even find that the assignments offer possibilities you wouldn't otherwise have considered.

At any rate, I'd rather get the occasional dull or pedestrian piece of writing from you than have you deliberately writing off-topic, or waiting to be seized by an inspiration that might not arrive. And I believe that the best way to improve your access to inspiration is to practice writing even when you're not inspired.

## SUBJECT MATTER

No set-in-stone rules here, but keep in mind that I have already seen *plenty* of undergrad poems about happy love lives, unhappy break-ups, snowy landscapes, winter sports, and recreational drug use. If you're going to tread this familiar ground, work harder.

## OKAY, FINALLY, THE SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

### 1. The Sounds of Words.

**T Jan 19:** First day of class. Introductions and a poem or two.

**Writing this week:** Exercise on the sounds of words.

As you do the reading, make a list of at least eight two- or three-word phrases that sound interesting to you. After you've made the list, pick out your favorite phrase.

From that phrase, generate the following four lists, of at least eight words each: (1.) words that rhyme with one of the words in your phrase; (2.) words made with various vowels but only the consonant sounds found in your phrase; (3.) phrases that alliterate with the words of your phrase; (4.) words that share no sounds at all with the words of your phrase. Now you'll have at least thirty-two entries in four lists.

Write a poem of less than twenty-five lines that, in grammatical sentences, includes all the words in your lists. Do your best to keep it coherent, but don't worry if it's not saying anything you care about. The point is to sound interesting. Attach a copy of your word lists and submit it on Thursday.

**TH Jan 21:** Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice Cream," "Sunday Morning," and "Anecdote of the Jar" (N 816-820); also "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (handout); Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," "The Windhover," "Pied Beauty," "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," "Spring and Fall," and "No Worst, There Is None" (N 755-8); Robert Pinsky, "Vessel," "Machines," and "To the Phoenix" (handout) Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale" (N 582); Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California" (N 1067). Recommended: Davidson & Fraser, Introduction (1-5).

**Exercise due.**

### 2. Sentence Rhythm & Complexity

**T Jan 26:** Read at least the first section of Karin Gottshall's *Crocus*. Also read Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (N 684); Robert Frost, "The Silken Tent" and "Come In" (N 806); Louise Glück, "The Garden" and "Vita Nova" (N 1199-1200); W. H. Auden, "As I Walked Out One Evening" (N 937); Tony Harrison, "A Kumquat for John Keats" (N 1168).

Recommended: Davidson & Fraser on Style (59-69).

**Decisions about your single-author book should be final by today.**

**Writing this week:** Exercise on sentence rhythms and complexity.

Write a short poem (15-20 lines) with a clear descriptive purpose, in which all of the sentences are fairly short and have straightforward syntax: use no colons or semicolons; eschew compound subjects or verbs; avoid dependent or subordinate clauses. Please do not make the poem about childhood or a similarly limited perspective—just describe a thing or an event in simple sentences. Bring this to class on Tuesday.

For Thursday, rewrite this poem as a single sentence, with subordination and compound sentence parts. Eliminating unnecessary repetition is okay, but try to keep all of the original content. Extend from this sentence into at least three more: double the length of the original poem, at least, after contracting it a bit.

**TH Jan 28:** Reading provided by the class: poems with a variety of sentence lengths and rhythms, taken (if possible) from the single-author book you're browsing.

### 3. Line & Enjambment

**T Feb 2:** Finish Gotshall's *Crocus*. Also read Davidson & Fraser, p. 28-43; John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (N 579); Robert Frost, "Acquainted with the Night" (N 804); Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues" (N 912); Marianne Moore, "The Fish" (N 855); e. e. cummings, "next to of course god america i" (N 894).

Recommended: Davidson & Fraser on workshop culture (85-95).

**Writing this week:** Exercise on the potential of the line break.

For Tuesday's class, transcribe ten or so first lines of poems by your poet (or from the anthology), spacing them equally on the page. As you select these lines, favor lines that aren't end-stopped, or at least lines that don't end with a period. Keep track of where you got these first lines.

For Thursday's class, you'll expand one of these first lines into a poem of 15-20 lines, building on an alternate "turn" from line 1 to line 2.

**TH Feb 4:** Workshop, probably. (TBA.)

### 4. Revision

**T Feb 9:** Read drafts of one or two Elizabeth Bishop poems (in handout). Bring a clean copy of an unrevised previous exercise today, for this week's writing.

Recommended: Davidson & Fraser on Establishing Practice (9-27).

**Writing this week:** Exercise in revision.

Working with one of the three exercises from earlier this semester, perform a serious re-examination and revision. This means more than just "tightening up" the parts that don't sound perfect to you: it's a question of working from the ground up. Begin by thinking about the purpose of the poem, or what sort of point you can find in it if you didn't have one in mind. Select the most important (or most successful) images and phrases, and rework the rest. Everything should be up for reconsideration: the opening, the ending, the structure of the poem's argument, emphasis, direction, tone, images, line length, and all. The finished version should be noticeably different from the original, but obviously kin to it.

**TH Feb 11:** Workshop.

**T Feb 16:** TBA. (I'm having my wisdom teeth extracted this week.)

**TH Feb 18:** TBA. (Possibly a workshop day, if I'm feeling up to it.)

### 5. Narrative

**T Feb 23:** Read William Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (N 473, 483); Robert Frost, "Home Burial," "The Wood-Pile," and "The Most of It" (N 796, 800, 807); Robinson Jeffers, "Orca" (handout). If you've never read them before, you might sample Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" (N 569), Browning's "Childe Roland" (N 650), Byron's *Don Juan* (N 513), a bit of *Beowulf* (N 2), or a taste of Chaucer (N 54). But don't overdo it.

**Writing this week:** Narrative.

Tell a story in a poem of 25-40 lines (due Thursday). The story may be relatively small in its scale, or you can try to condense an impossibly long narrative into a very small space. Don't abandon the descriptive and musical capacities of poetry just because you're working in a mode that often falls to prose. You should also keep in mind, however, that in a narrative something must *happen*: there should be a beginning, a middle, a climax, and an end, all linked by a sequence of cause and effect. Time has to elapse.

**TH Feb 25:** Workshop.

6. Lyric

**T Mar 2:** Read Emily Dickinson, #372 (N 725); Thomas Hardy, "Hap" (N 744); Hart Crane, the first three sections of "Voyages" (N 903); Irving Layton, "Berry Picking" (N 968); Robert Lowell, "Epilogue" (N 1009); Philip Larkin, "Sad Steps" (N 1032); John Ashbery, "Ode to Bill" (N 1083).

Recommended for this week and next: Davidson & Fraser on Voice (44-58).

**Writing this week:** Lyric.

In a poem of about 20 lines, describe a moment or a situation, but describe it internally, from a first-person point of view, focusing on the emotional tenor of the moment. Do your best not to state this emotional tenor outright: let it be implicit in the details or in the statements of your poem's narrator. (It's okay if the narrator is a lot like you.) If narrative requires that something happen, lyric requires that something is about to happen, or has just happened. But time doesn't really go by. What keeps this sort of description interesting? Where does the tension and resolution come from? (Be thinking about that.)

**TH Mar 4:** Workshop.

**Spring Recess.** You might want to take the Manning books with you if you're traveling.

7. Dramatic Monologue & Borrowed Voices

**T Mar 16:** Read Maurice Manning, *Bucolics*. Look at a few of the "Dreadful Chapters" in *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*. Also, see Robert Browning, "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" (N 642, 643); Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" (N 629, 639); Anthony Hecht, "Death the Painter" (N 1043).

Recommended: Davidson & Fraser on voice, continued (146-155).

**Writing this week:** Dramatic Monologue.

Come up with a scene, in a story of your own devising or behind the scenes of a story that's well known to you, in which one character has an occasion to speak to another who remains silent. The speaker may be concealing something important from his or her audience, or might reveal something unintentionally. Then write a poem of about 40 lines (due on Thursday) in the character's voice, employing a good range of poetic effects while also revealing implicit things about your speaker's psychology. (This is a difficult genre to manage, but it's capable of some amazing things.)

**TH Mar 18:** Workshop.

### 8. Experiment & Borrowed Structures

**T Mar 23:** Read Maurice Manning, *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*. Have a look also at Geoffrey Hill, "from *Mercian Hymns*" (N 1141), Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B" (N 915), and perhaps one or two other poems I'll try to dig up.

**Writing this week:** Non-Poetic Forms.

Borrow a form from some non-literary location for language—the geometric proof, the teacher-to-parent letter on student conduct, the legal brief, etc.—but bring to that form an interest in sound-play and suggestive meaning, so that your results are unambiguously poetry. You can let your subject matter be dictated by the form you borrow, or you can use the occasion to critique the assumptions of the form you borrow—or you can get the energy of the poem from fitting the "wrong" material into the form you're borrowing. This should be fun, but try to give it the potential to do serious work as well.

**W Mar 24:** Extracurricular: I strongly recommend that you attend the reading by Maurice Manning this evening.

**TH Mar 25:** Class visit from Maurice Manning.

### 9. Metaphor & Riddle

**T Mar 30:** Read Richard Wilbur's essay "The Persistence of Riddles" (handout) and riddles by Wilbur and Greg Williamson (handout); Anglo-Saxon riddles (N 10-11); Emily Dickinson #1096 (N 730), #1489 (N 732), #68 (N 719); Craig Raine, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (N 1207); May Swenson, "Cardinal Ideograms" (N 972); James Merrill, "A Downward Look" and Elizabeth Bishop, "Twelve O'Clock News" (handout).

**Writing this week:** Exercise on metaphor and perception.

For Tuesday, write five or six riddles, following the principles in the weekend's reading: a riddle works like a metaphor with an unstated tenor, and with some aspect of the vehicle's unlikeness made explicit.

For Thursday, extend one or more of these riddles into a longer poem. You may make the tenor explicit again. You are encouraged to make other comparisons or descriptions of the same item, or to make that item important in a narrative that implicates more than one person somehow.

**W Mar 31:** Extracurricular: there's a poetry reading at the Fleming Art Museum this evening that may be of interest to you.

**TH Apr 1:** Workshop.

**ALSO:** Two revised poems due in class.

### 10. Metaphor as a Method of Thought

**T Apr 6:** Read Robert Frost's essay "Education by Poetry" (handout); Michael Donaghy, "Machines" and "More Machines" (handout); Thomas Wyatt, "Whoso List to Hunt" (N 103) and "They Flee from Me" (N 104); William Shakespeare, sonnets 18 (171), 73 (N 173) and 130 (N 177); John Donne, "A Valediction of Weeping" (N 197) and "The Flea"

(N 202); Seamus Heaney, “Digging” (N 1179); Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish” (N 960).

**Writing this week:** Extended metaphor and its ramifications.

Begin with a simple statement in which you compare an abstraction—time, or life, or justice, for example—to something concrete: an image, an object, or an event. (This metaphor can be a received one, or one from your own observation.) Following up on Frost’s idea that all metaphors break down somewhere, follow the comparison out to its logical conclusions: explore every way in which the abstraction *is* like the concrete vehicle. Then go beyond this truth, into less plausible associations and points of comparison. You may wish to let your statements grow extravagant and ridiculous before the end of the poem, or you may wish to let the metaphor teach you something about the real nature of the abstraction you’re examining.

**TH Apr 8:** Workshop.

### 11. Description

**T Apr 13:** Read John Clare, “Badger” (N 564); Herman Melville, “The Maldive Shark” (N 674); Seamus Heaney, “Skunk” (N 1182); Derek Mahon, “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” (N 1194); Eric Ormsby, “Starfish” and “Skunk Cabbage” (N 1196-7); Stanley Kunitz, “Robin Redbreast” (N 930); Yusef Komunyakaa, “Banking Potatoes” (N 1209); Daniel Hall, “Mangosteens” (N 1235); Li-Young Lee, “Persimmons” (N 1243); Elizabeth Bishop, “The Armadillo” and Robert Lowell, “Skunk Hour” (handout).  
Recommended: Davidson & Fraser on Bigfoot (170-185).

**Writing this week:** Description.

For this week’s poems (each  $\geq 25$  lines, due on Thursday), write to describe (a.) an item, scene, creature, plant, or process that you know very well (something so familiar it is almost habitual, something you can easily conjure in your mind’s eye) and (b.) a similar sort of subject that you had never seen before this month. (For the second poem, you may simply go to an interesting new place and observe it for half an hour or so.) In both cases, your imperative is to describe so clearly and vividly that your reader can also see, hear, smell, etc., the subject. (It might help to frame the poem by imagining a specific reader who hasn’t seen the things you’re describing.)

Use metaphor judiciously, and keep the sounds of your words interesting.

**TH Apr 15:** Workshop.

**ALSO:** Two more revised poems due in class.

### 12. Ecphrasis

**T Apr 20:** Read John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (N 585); Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Hiram Power’s Greek Slave” (handout); Christina Rossetti, “In an Artist’s Studio” (N 734); W. B. Yeats, “Lapis Lazuli” (N 780); W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Shield of Achilles” (N 939, 946); Elizabeth Bishop, “Poem” (handout); Derek Mahon, “Courtyards in Delft” (handout); Greg Williamson, from “Double Exposures” (N 1249); Frank O’Hara, “Why I Am Not a Painter” (N 1076); Jorie Graham, “At Luca Signorelli’s Resurrection of the Body” (1223).

**Writing this week:** Ecphrasis.

Choose a work of static visual art (or sculpture) that interests you, and write a poem

of at least 20 lines (due on Thursday) that describes, inhabits, or otherwise responds to it. Using some of the tools and techniques from earlier weeks, try to get at the “life” of the static form by situating it in a span of time. (Poems, even lyric poems, take place over time, in a way that paintings just don’t.)

**TH Apr 22:** Workshop.

### 13. Elegy

**T Apr 27:** Read W. B. Yeats, “Easter 1916” (N 772); A. E. Housman, “To an Athlete Dying Young” (N 760); W. H. Auden, “Funeral Blues” and “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (N 938, 939); Gwendolyn Brooks, “Medgar Evers” (N 1000); Emily Dickinson, #340 (723), #372 (725), #68 (719). Oh, and have a look at Milton’s “Lycidas” (N 269) and Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (N 696). They’re inevitable in a discussion of elegy.

**Writing this week:** Elegy.

Write a poem of about twenty lines (due Friday) that memorializes someone deceased. The subject does not need to be someone who was close to you, and it will be easier to treat the assignment as an exercise if you choose a subject whose importance to you is oblique. In fact, many of the best poetic elegies have been for public figures, or people with whom the poet was not personally acquainted. Weigh the various imperatives of the elegy—celebration of the dead, mourning a passing, remembering moments of life, etc.—and try not to step into any of the obvious pitfalls of cliché or sentimentality.

**TH Apr 29:** Special workshop / reading day. We have been invited to read our poems on WRUV this morning, and unless there’s a loud general protest among you, I’d like to accept the invitation.

**T May 4:** Last day of class. Workshop on elegy.

**ALSO:** Four revised poems due in class.

Our assigned exam time is Thursday, May 13, 8:00–11:00 AM. This isn’t the sort of class in which a standard exam would be appropriate, but please keep that time clear. We may need to meet one last time.

If you’re ever stuck for an idea for a poem, here ten strategies or topics that will probably work:

1. Take up a poem you’ve read recently and disagree with it.
2. Write about a crime that was never committed.
3. Describe something impossible that you wish would occur.
4. Choose a virtue, or a vice, and speak to it as if it were a person.
5. Go eat something you’ve never eaten before and describe it.
6. Choose a character from fiction or myth and speak in his or her voice.
7. Turn your homework for another class into an instructional poem.
8. Write about performing a skill that you know well; contrast it with the writing of poetry.
9. Speak in the voice of an inanimate object.
10. Choose a large mammal or other zoo animal and make it a central symbol.