SPRING 2012

The science, poetics and politics of plants
Instructor: Alison Hawthorne Deming

This craft seminar will look at a range of formal strategies (literary and photo-journalism, immersion journalism, memoir, meditative essay, biography, science writing, and bioacoustical musical composition) in exploring the science, poetics and politics of plants as a lens into our time and culture. We’ll start with some grounding in texts from a range of cultures and take off from there. This is a preliminary list that will need some winnowing before January, but it will give you a sense of type of reading we will do. While this list is driven by concern for content (human relationships with plants both wild and cultivated), as with all craft seminars, we will work to tease out craft devices that can inform your own writing. Seminar participants will write weekly assignments, conduct focused field work on a plant of their choosing using a multi-disciplinary approach, and write a final essay. The option is open for final projects in other forms, should you wish: video, graphic memoir, short story, poem sequence, or a thesis chapter.

DRAFT READING LIST
Intro Packet: “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”; W.E.B. Du Bois essay on cotton; Kalevala (Scandanavia) and Tlaloc (Nahuatl); M.F. K. Fisher essay on eating ice plant; Oliver Sacks essay on horsetails . . .
James Agee, LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN
Ted Conover, COYOTES
John McPhee, ORANGES
Patricia Hampl, THE FLORIST’S DAUGHTER
John Fowles, THE TREE
Barbara McClintock, A FEELING FOR THE ORGANISM
Janisse Ray, ECOLOGY OF A CRACKER CHILDHOOD
Richard Preston, THE WILD TREES
Nalini Nadkari, BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY & Documentary Film
David Mas Masumato, WISDOM OF THE LAST FARMER
Ruben Martinez, CROSSING OVER
Michael Pollan, BOTANY OF DESIRE
Gary Paul Nabhan, CHASING CHILIS
David Dunn, Bioacoustical Musical Composition
Adam Nicholson, SISSINGHIRST: AN UNFINISHED HISTORY
Robin Kimmerer, GATHERING MOSS: A NATURAL & CULTURAL HISTORY OF MOSS
War and Peace
Instructor: Jane Miller (retired)

Tolstoy declared in *War and Peace*, Volume II, that his aim was to blur the line between fiction and history in order to get closer to the truth. Since that time, “the truth” has undergone interrogation and transformation, including its recent excoriations and nascent recovery.

We will investigate extremes ("war" and "peace") of experience for an understanding of how the truth operates in poetry. On the one hand, we will read books that confront violence, aggression, and disjunction; as well, we will read poems that are shaped by silence, soul-speaking, and meditation. This includes writing that is, to some degree, at war with itself, as well as writing that comes from a peaceful heart. What about the quiet at the center of the proverbial storm?

We'll examine poems by Paul Celan, Anna Ahkmatova, Fanny Howe, Jean Valentine, and many more poets, as well as prose writing by J.M. Coetzee, Vincent Van Gogh, and others. In our study of very specialized voices, we will also see what happens to the voice of the speaker in a long poem or extended monologue, as in the work of Carolyn Forché and Marguerite Duras.

Let us study each writer’s bearing toward classic notions of confessions, “admissions,” autobiography, and post-confessionalists.

Are free association, connotation, and irony friends or enemies of the truth? Is there a future for the personal voice in poetry after postmodernism? Are extreme dictions—violent or peaceful—signatures of those whom we may conclude speak for our times?

These are some of my questions for our course. During the time of the semester, we will also discuss your questions.

Each student will be expected to write a Book of Questions, a page or so created each week in preparation for discussion. Furthermore, each student will be paired with a writer on the reading list and will lead the discussion on that writer, presenting questions for discussion. Full class participation is expected.

Questions should regard aesthetic issues, for the most part, but may stray into other inquiries.
The final project will be each student’s compiled Book of Questions with an Introduction analyzing the questions as they regard: the texts of the course; your own writing; the nature of the questions themselves.

The Art of the Short Novel
Instructor: Aurelie Sheehan

The purpose of this class is to get to know fourteen short novels, and in so doing learn more about the parameters of the novel as an entity and as a creative endeavor. I’m going to define the short novel as one that comes in at under 200 pages. It is sometimes, perhaps, a novella, and it is sometimes, perhaps, a masterpiece, nothing short about it except length.

In this class, we’ll investigate structure and use of time—tracking time where we see it, how it may be accelerated, slowed down, altered. We’ll look at internal structures such as chapters, thinking about how they move the story, and how the story is laid out on a broad scale. We’ll attempt to identify and articulate each novel’s particular character. What makes this novel itself? What are its essential passions and preoccupations? As part of this quest, we’ll look at matters of voice and factors of heat. Comparing novels, we’ll consider reverberations, alternate plans, and legacies.

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction*
Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*
Lisa Shea, *Hula*
Albert Camus, *The Stranger*
Haruki Murakami, *After Dark*
Nancy Lemann, *Lives of the Saints*
Henry James, *The Beast in the Jungle*
Lydia Millet, *My Happy Life*
Padgett Powell, *Edisto*
Darcey Steinke, *Milk*
Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams*
Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Paramo*
Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*
Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*
Nicholson Baker, *The Mezzanine*