

ENGLISH 596H 002
Thursday 12:30 – 3 p.m. at the Poetry Center

SPRING 2008
ALISON DEMING

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MUSE

This seminar will touch down in classical, romantic, and oral tradition works that find inspiration in the natural world. We then will launch into close reading of modern and contemporary works with an eye to the aesthetic range of poetry that contends with nature, sense of place, and our historical predicament in terms of relationship between nature and culture. This is a craft seminar, so our interest is not simply in how this particular subject matter comes into the poetry. We are interested in how poetic form is shaped by these interests, in poetry as an ecosystem of consciousness (everything is connected!), and, to borrow the words of William Rueckert, “poems as part of the energy pathways which sustain life,” poems as “a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy).” The reading list includes writers who are considered canonical to nature writing (Bishop, Merwin, Oliver, Ammons), as well as poets whose work is less frequently viewed through an eco-critical lens (Williams, Moss, Baca, Flynn). We will feud amicably about our aesthetic biases and the uses of poetry, attempting to expand the range of formal possibilities for our own work.

I have included a short list of alternative books, in the event you’d like to branch off the main trail. You may substitute one or two of the books on the “Alternates” list for one or two on the primary list. I’ll ask you to make those decisions by the second class meeting. If you do so, I’ll expect you to make a short (ten-minute max.) presentation on the book.

COURSE CONTENT AND REQUIREMENTS:

We will read and discuss eleven books plus a reading packet that I will hand out on the first day of class. You’ll be expected to **write a brief annotation (1 – 2) pages** on each book and to hand it in on the day that book is discussed. Annotations—an exercise in concision!--should: 1) indicate the author’s basic aesthetic/historical position; 2) describe your experience as a reader and what strategies/devices/craft elements led you to that experience; 3) give some specific examples from individual poems; 4) make an overall and fair assessment of the work’s importance/usefulness/audience. This is a craft course for writers, therefore your reading should be intuitive and acquisitive rather than analytical. Look for devices you can cull for your own work. Please pay attention to the craft details: line, diction, figurative language, music, form, tone.

WEEKLY FIELD OBSERVATION: Whitman in his late essay “Poetry To-Day in America—Shakespeare—The Future”) made the charge that “the overwhelming mass of poetic works, as now absorb’d into human character, exerts a certain constipating, repressing, in-door, and artificial influence.” Step one for any attempt at raising one’s environmental consciousness is to get outside and make an observation. Therefore, I will ask each of you to keep a field notebook for the semester. You need only to choose a focus (e.g., one species of plant or animal, one place, one walk you like to take, one constellation, one crack in the sidewalk). Each week I want you to make an observation of this chosen subject and bring to class **ONE SENTENCE** about what you’ve observed.

When you get bored, you can supplement field observation with book learning, art, music, or some other associative material. But you must keep the focus and work to renew your interest in it for the duration, returning to field observation as the default practice. We'll try having everyone read these at the start of each class.

PACKET: Excerpts from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Virgil's *Georgics*, *The Kalevala*, Miguel Leon-Portilla's translations from the Nahuatl of Aztec Flower Songs, Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo songs, and Wordsworth's introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude*.

Books we will read, in this order, available at the UA Bookstore:

William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems*
Lorine Niedecker, *The Granite Pail*
Pablo Neruda (tr., Nathaniel Tarn), *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*
Jimmy Santiago Baca, *Black Mesa Poems*
Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems*
W. S. Merwin, *Migration*
Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems: Volume One*
A. R. Ammons, *Garbage*
Thyllias Moss, *Slave Moth*
Susan Stewart, *Columbarium*
Nick Flynn, *Blind Huber*

ALTERNATES:

Elias Lönnrot (compiled by) , tr. by Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr., *The Kalevala*
Pattiann Rogers, *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*
Gary Snyder, *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*
William Stobb, *Nervous Systems*
Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet*

RECOMMENDED PROSE WORKS:

Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*
Jed Rasula, *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*
Harold Fromm and Cheryl Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*