

## 2023 Fall 6331 Syllabus

Something that increasingly preoccupies me is the crossover or meeting or tension between poetry as a diurnal thing and as something exceptional and inspired. Perhaps this is nowhere more clearly displayed or dramatized than setting the date at the foot of a poem, as was the practice of Sylvia Plath and Osip Mandelstam. A full day or a blank. A black letter day or a red-letter day. Or not “or”, actually, but “and”. A black letter day *and* a red-letter day. All Quiet on the Western Front *and* a state of emergency. Something momentary *and* for the ages. The latter requirement of a poem is obvious, but to me (and maybe my taste here is unorthodox or even depraved), it’s also true to say that if a piece isn’t momentary, it isn’t real, or it isn’t necessary. “Did not the poet sing it with such airs/ that one believed he had a sword upstairs,” as Yeats wrote, about this quality of urgency and contingency and imperative.

So, your instruction for this semester is: Muse, sing the instant!

All the books we are reading here play in that arena. They work to leverage momentary flashes into the realm of the eternal. One Brit, one European, and 3 Americans. I think we might take them in something like reverse order, beginning with Adam Zagajewski’s posthumously published volume called *True Life*. Next, Elizabeth Bishop, where we’ll concentrate on her final book *Geography III* and some other late poems and fragments, followed by James Schuyler, where *The Morning of the Poem* will most engage us, though, as with Bishop, for reasons of your economy, I have listed (and ordered) his *Collected*. Then one of Lowell’s late, short books of “sonnets”, the retrospective *For Lizzie and Harriet*. Last and not least is the British poet (and Lowell biographer), Ian Hamilton. *Fifty Poems or Sixty Poems or Collected Poems*, your call. (If you find copies hard to come by, let me know in advance, and I’ll see what I can rustle up.)

All have different stratagems or methods: Zagajewski fuses the life of the mind with the other thing, so that a poem comes out as part-ethics, part-pleasure. Bishop – “revise, revise, revise” – makes a sort of hard, lacquered, shiny surface; Schuyler, the so-called “New York poet” improvises; Lowell, in *L and H*, writes rapid, compressed summary of long experience; and Hamilton writes or keeps only what I’d call “crisis poems”. I hope some or all will accompany you through your careers.

Classes will be held in the Suite or at my house, 543 NE 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I will look to you to come most weeks with printed copies of poems (2 copies for me, please, so 9 in all), and always with copies of the week’s book, having read and re-read it and thought about it well in advance. It’s a smaller class than we are used to having, and perhaps smaller than ideal. I am deeply grateful to our 2 third years for offering to come. It means there will be more for each of you, but I will also ask more of each of you. If one or more of you feel like writing a long poem in instalments, a la “Morning of the Poem”, that will be of great interest. I’d like you to do some presenting as well.

Office Hours will be immediately before class, except when class is at my house. I expect to be coming in two or three times a week anyway, and I’m not looking to make myself scarce while I’m around.

Here's how I see the semester going, give or take.

28 August	Introductions. Reading of one poem.
4 September	Labor Day, no class
11 September	Zagajewski
18 September	Zagajewski
25 September	Bishop
2 October	Bishop
9 October	Bishop
16 October	Schuyler
23 October	Schuyler
30 October	Schuyler
6 November	Lowell
13 November	Lowell
20 November	Hamilton
27 November	Hamilton
4 December	last class – my house

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Zagajewski: *True Life* ISBN 0374601569

Bishop: *Poems* ISBN 0374532362

Schuyler: *Collected Poems* (or *Selected Poems* or *The Morning of the Poem*) ISBN 0374524033

Lowell: *For Lizzie and Harriet* ISBN 0374512914

Hamilton: *Collected Poems* (or *Fifty Poems* or *Sixty Poems*) ISBN 0571227368