Leonora Desar  
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Introduction to Fiction and Poetry Workshop  
CRWRI-UA.815.023  
Monday and Wednesday, 12:30 PM – 1:45 PM  

The big picture: Our goal is to have fun while learning craft tools that will make us stronger writers. Fun, wait, isn’t this a class? It is. As writers we often forget the fun part—the magic part. Our class will consist of exercises designed to put the magic into writing, while learning different craft tools—repetition, humor, magical realism, writing from a child’s POV, writing letters to ourselves—and more.

This is a writing intensive course. There will also be a lot of reading. The assignments are designed to challenge you and introduce ways to make your writing memorable. You will workshop two submissions and complete weekly exercises. You will also submit written observations culled from daily life.

Peer critique: Our goal is to become stronger writers without becoming paralyzed by this person:

The Inner Critic

To this end, your responses to student work should begin by highlighting a piece’s strengths. Please structure your critiques this way:

Dear (student’s name),

An opening paragraph about what you admired.

A second paragraph containing a striking line or image.

Two to three paragraphs containing a constructive critique, done kindly and with respect. These can include passages you would like to see tightened, elements you think could be fleshed out and explored, language that wasn’t clear or could have a stronger cadence, characters that you would like to be made more dimensional.
You will email me a copy of your critique two days before the student’s workshop (by noon) and bring in a hard copy for both me and the student. You will also write notes and line edits on the student’s work. You’ll staple your letter to the front.

**Workshop assignments:** You’ll be workshopped twice—four poems (six-page maximum), and one story (1,500 to 3,500 words). All work should be typed in Times New Roman 12 pt font and double-spaced. Bring one hard copy for me and one for each of your classmates. Email me an electronic copy as well.

**Reading:** Each week there will be assigned reading based on a theme and craft tool. Come to class ready to discuss. I’ll be grading you on participation and preparedness. We’ll have days geared more toward poetry and others toward fiction, but sometimes I’ll include both—as fiction writers we can steal tools from poets and vice versa.

**Weekly creative writing assignments:** I’ll be giving you writing prompts that come from the material and techniques discussed. You’ll write a flash fiction (500 – 1,000 words) or a poem. These won’t be workshopped but handed in to me. The goal won’t be to write something flawless but to draw on the material and techniques discussed. Email these to me by noon on Sunday in a Word file. Label the file: Your Name_Creative Writing Exercise.

Some weeks there will be two writing prompts. Unless indicated, you’ll have your choice between these—please email me only one. In two cases there will be an opportunity for extra credit.

**Weekly observations:** I’d like you to keep a journal. These should include unusual things that intrigue you in the course of daily life—i.e. That fruit vendor with the weird hairy ears who only talks to children, the guy who feeds gourmet cookies to the neighborhood dogs, the woman on the train who reminds you of your great-aunt Shirley, the man who sits on the same bench every Tuesday in Washington Square Park and never looks happy—ever—unless he’s eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Writing down what we see will make us better at invention, at culling the details that bring people and things to life. Your observations should be 150-350 words long. You will email one to me by noon each Sunday with your creative writing exercise. These should be in a separate Word file. Label this: Your Name_Weekly Observation.

**A piece that you admire:** You will choose a piece with a strong voice that appeals to you. This should not be reading we’ve done in class. You will write a brief analysis of what makes the piece effective (500 words).

**Technology:** No laptops or phones in class. We’re going to teleport it back to the 18th century and use pen and paper.

**Office Hours:** Please come see me during office hours. I would like to meet with you at least once after your first workshop.
**Attendance:** Attendance is required. After one undocumented absence you will need to provide a doctor’s note or other official documentation. More than one undocumented absence will result in a grade deduction. Two or more latenesses (10 minutes or more) will count as a 50 percent absence (with two latenesses equaling an absence). Your grade will decrease by a half letter with each unexcused absence: an A becomes an A-, etc. Your grade includes participation, which will also be affected if you’re absent.

**Lateness:** All assignments must be handed in on time. Late assignments will affect your grade. For each day an assignment is late (creative writing exercise, workshop piece, critique letter, observation) you will lose half a grade for that assignment (an “A” becomes an “A-,” etc.).

**Grading:**

**Class participation (20 percent):**

Participation and doing a careful read of the assigned material is critical to your grade. If you feel more comfortable, feel free to read aloud from written notes or from your peer critiques.

**Observations, critique letters, weekly creative writing assignments, short analysis of a writer whom who admire (60 percent):**

You won’t be graded on talent but your engagement with the work. Have you been thoughtful in your peer review? Have you used the assigned pieces and craft tools as springboards for your work?

Please edit your pieces for typos and spelling/grammatical errors: these will affect your grade.

**Final portfolio (20 percent):**

Your workshop pieces for the semester, with revisions. You will include these in a bound or fastened folder.

**Plagiarism:** Don’t do it. If you are having trouble coming up with an idea or formulating a piece speak to me and I’ll help guide you. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be reported per NYU policy.

**Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980. NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities 8 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor New York, NY 10003-6675 Telephone: 212-998-4980 Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114 Web site: [http://www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd)

**Student Wellness Policy:** Unless we see explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt the instructor’s attention. Please send an email putting this work in context before submitting work, especially for workshop, that may be
interpreted as such. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

**Monday, January 27**

**Writing what we know**

Reading: Selections from Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*

The great thing about writing with the same phrase for each graph—“I remember”—is that it takes away some of the legwork (and anxiety).

In-class exercise: Write a piece where every paragraph begins with “I remember.” Cull from what you know but feel free to invent the details.

To discuss: Ways of remembering. Ways of slaying your inner critic: Write fast, write about dreams, switch up mediums, write an email.

**Wednesday, January 29**

**Writing about people**

I had a grandmother. You have or have had a grandmother. The person sitting next to you on the subway has one. So how do we make up a story about our grandmother—or someone else—that stands out? The answer (or at least one): vivid language and sharp, specific details.

Reading:

“Salvador Late or Early,” by Sandra Cisneros
“Never-Never Time,” “Heritage,” by Justin Torres (from *We the Animals*)
“Egg, Toss, August 1989,” by Meghan Cass
"The Elder Sister," by Sharon Olds
“The Gift,” by Li-Young-Lee
“Shoot the Moon,” (first six paragraphs) by Susan Orlean

Assignment: Write a poem about a person. This should include someone’s physicality and what that physicality reveals. This can be an invented person, family member, or famous person.

**Monday, February 3**

**Flash fiction and prose poetry: using compression to say more**

Sometimes it’s not WHAT we say but what we omit that gives a piece its power. Here we’ll learn how to use white space—or what’s off-page—and to whittle language down to its most
essential. We’ll also learn how to listen for music in our work—repetition, rhythm, voice—and to include vivid, unusual detail.

Reading:

“On Mondays, Francesca Takes the Stairs,” by Cami Park
“Reflections, While Sitting in Traffic,” by Jaquira Diaz
“The Colonel,” by Carolyn Forché
“The Shawl,” by Cynthia Ozick
“Let’s Say,” by Julia Strayer
“Sometimes We Both Fight in Wars,” by Leesa Cross-Smith
“We Wanted More,” by Justin Torres (from We the Animals)
“Girl,” by Jamaica Kincaid

Assignment (optional, extra credit): Write a prose poem using repetition and one striking image.

Wednesday, February 5

Confessional Poetry: Writing about pain, nostalgia, and the taboo

How do we write about pain in a way that’s not clichéd or overwrought, but still meaningful?

Reading:


Assignment: write two poems: one to your future self and one to your younger self. Mail these to yourself by snail-mail. Use repetition and at least one unusual image. Do NOT open it (or look at an electronic copy) until our revision assignment this May.

This assignment is required.

Monday, February 10

The poetry of objects: using the object as a gateway

Sometimes we don’t know where to begin with a poem and a familiar object can open up a lens, or help us tell a familiar story—love, heartbreak, illness—in an unfamiliar and inventive way.

Reading:

“The Room of My Life,” by Anne Sexton
“Rain,” by Kathy Fish
“Stone,” by Charles Simic
“Breaking the Pig,” by Etgar Keret
“Hatched,” by Nicole Rivas
Assignment: Write a poem about an object—a room, a desk, your mother’s cookbook that she inherited from her mother, that secret compartment in your father’s briefcase. Use the object to reveal a greater truth.

Wednesday, February 12

The language of love and sex

“After Making Love in Winter,” by Sharon Olds
“Snowstorm,” by Tara Isabel Zambrano
“Tonight, We Are Awake,” by Melissa Goode
“i like my body when it is with your,” by E.E. Cummings
“Taking Off My Clothes,” by Carolyn Forché
“Here We Aren’t, So Quickly,” by Jonathan Safran-Foer

Assignment: Write a poem about love and/or sex with one of the following POV:

a) the collective “we”
-or-

b) one that alternates between “I” and “you.”

Monday, February 17: Presidents’ Day, no class

Wednesday, February 19

Workshop (poetry)

Monday, February 24

Home: the poetry of place

How do we make a place and the people in it resonant and vivid?

Reading:

*The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros (selections)
“Texas, 2003; Texas 1969; Leaving Texas,” by Greta Wilensky
“I Hate New York,” by Carrie Murphy
“Detroit, Tomorrow,” by Philip Levine
“The City In Which I Loved You,” by Li-Young Lee
“We Love You Crispina,” by Jenny Zhang
Assignment: Write a poem about a place. Anthropomorphize this place into an actual character/person. (i.e. Las Vegas as a surprisingly meek showgirl, London as a reluctant socialite). Go against some of the tropes we might expect.

Wednesday, February 26

Workshop (poetry)

Monday, March 2

You can do magic (and metaphor)

Metaphor is a way of elevating what’s familiar and making it awesome. For instance: you feel small around your boss. A realistic way of rendering that would be to describe the scene using familiar detail. A metaphorical way would be to use an actual metaphor—feeling small—and making it real. When your boss starts yelling at you, you start to shrink—literally. Or when your boyfriend’s mom grills you. Or maybe you’re just so mad you turn into a literal ball of fire. Or you get anxious and guess what: there’s an earthquake in your stomach. The metaphor isn’t just unusual for the sake of being unusual: it’s revealing, illuminating something about character.

Reading:

“Moth,” by Joanne Comito
“Town of Birds,” by Heather Monley
“The Rememberer,” by Aimee Bender
“Argyle Nights,” by Paul Beckman

Assignment: Write a prose poem or flash that conveys a character’s emotion through one literalized metaphor.

Wednesday, March 4

Workshop (poetry)

Monday, March 9

Luring the reader: how to get someone to suspend disbelief and follow you anywhere

Some of the best weirdest most visceral pieces actually begin quite ordinarily. This is a trick. On one hand, it gets the writer to suspend their own disbelief, to let go and immerse themselves in what they’re writing. For the reader, it allows them to join the ride: they recognize the world they’re reading about, then subtly—or perhaps rapidly—it shifts.

Reading:

“The Vague Sounds of Life,” by Mary Thompson
“Country Miles,” by Robert King
“Daddy,” by Sylvia Plath
Assignment: Write a poem about a haunted place—an old elementary school, a coffee shop from your hometown, the first house that you grew up in. Focus on the sense of smell and how it illuminates this place. Start with the familiar and lead to the uncanny.

**Wednesday, March 11**

Workshop (poetry)

**Monday, March 16: Spring recess, no class**

**Wednesday, March 18: Spring recess, no class**

**Monday, March 23**

Subverting form: how to tell familiar stories in unfamiliar ways

We can innovate by getting creative with our form. We can write poems and stories as lists, as second person entreaties, as instruction manuals.

Reading:

“Seven Items in Jason Reynolds’ Jacket Pocket, Two Days After His Suicide, As Found by his Eight-Year-Old Brother, Grady,” by Robert Swartwood
“Three Things You Should Know About Peggy Paula,” by Lindsay Hunter
“Note to Sixth-Grade Self,” by Julie Orringer
“Fable,” by Charles Yu

Assignment: Write a flash fiction as a list, a how-to, or triptych (in three parts).

**Wednesday, March 25**

Workshop (poetry)

**Monday, March 30**

**Writing from a child or teenager’s POV**: This can be awesome. For one thing, kids see things that adults often don’t give them credit for. And for another, they usually render it in a cooler and more inventive way.
Reading:

“Salvador Dali Eyes,” by Douglas Campbell
Twins, by Marcy Dermansky (selected chapters)
“Gorilla, Gorilla, Gorilla,” by Emily Weber

Assignment: Write a flash piece from a child’s POV—what are some things that your character notices that an adult wouldn’t?

Wednesday, April 1

Reinventing the wheel: retelling familiar tales

How do we look at older texts with a critical lens and reinvent them? And what about iconic persons? How can we deepen the myths and mysteries surrounding them?

“Hills Like White Elephants,” by Ernest Hemingway
“Hills Like Tan Lions,” by Amy Stuber
“Amelia,” by Aubrey Hirsch

Assignment: Reinvent a familiar story OR tell the story of a famous person from history using invented detail. You may do this as a poem or a flash.

Monday, April 6

The Funny-Sad Thing (n): the ability to write about profound/sad/heart-wrenching things in a way that’s deceptively simple—and funny.

Reading:

“This Person,” by Miranda July
“Sea Oak,” by George Saunders
Twins, by Marcy Dermansky (selected chapters)
It’s Kind of a Funny Story, by Ned Vizzini (selected chapters)

Assignment: Write a flash about the worst thing that’s happened to a character—ever—using humor.

Wednesday, April 8

Workshop (fiction)

Monday, April 13

Lenu/Lina—or doing a Betty and Veronica in fiction
One is street smart. The other, book smart. One gets by on her wiles and cunning, the other by her discipline. They both want the same guy.

We’ve seen this trope before, in popular films and culture—the Archie, Betty, Veronica love triangle—and in literature, in Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*. Contrasts appeal to us. They’re also a way of making our characters stand out. How can we evoke this with originality?

*My Brilliant Friend*, by Elena Ferrante (selections)
“Duet,” by Stacey Richter
“Something That Needs Nothing,” by Miranda July
“My Mother Has Lived in a Houseboat, a Lighthouse, and a Fire Station,” by Alicia Bones
*Twins*, by Marcy Dermansky (selected chapters)

Assignment: Write a flash piece with two characters that foil one another. Write this as one scene.

**Wednesday, April 15**

Workshop (fiction)

**Monday, April 20**

**Endings: Suzie Poo and The NeverEnding Story**

Sometimes we have an amazing ending but it doesn’t feel amazing because, well, as the saying goes, we haven’t earned it. So how do we earn our endings? The answer: by planting it as soon as possible. Sometimes we need to do this in reverse; in other words, we have our ending but we don’t have the seeds that lead there. So we go back and we plant. We can take our cues from Season 3 of *Stranger Things*, modern ghost stories, and more.

Reading:

“The Lady with the Dog,” by Anton Chekhov
“Here Devils,” by L.W. Nicholson

Assignment (required): Write a story with a dramatic (and earned) ending.

**Wednesday, April 22**

Workshop (fiction)

**Monday, April 27**

Workshop (fiction)

**Wednesday, April 29**

Workshop (fiction)
Assignment: A writer that you admire: Your analysis due to me by noon Sunday. Bring this and a copy of the writer’s story to Monday’s class.

**Monday, May 4**

**Writing with Voice**

Reading:

“Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin  
“Out There,” by Linsday Hunter  
“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” by David Foster Wallace  
“A .45 to Pay The Rent,” by Charles Bukowski  
“Roy Spivey,” by Miranda July  
“Hurricane,” by Wes Holtermann

Today we’ll be discussing the pieces that you’ve chosen. Each of you will read aloud from the piece and explain what you admired—and how the author’s craft techniques achieved this.

**Wednesday, May 6**

**Editing is often re-writing—from scratch**

The greatest (and most terrifying) advice I ever read about revision was to rewrite a draft—from scratch. That’s right. This means not even looking at the original. How is this even possible, you might ask. Well, according to Nancy Stohlman, when we rewrite—without cheating—we’ll remember the best and most powerful lines of the original. We’ll reincorporate them. And then we can compare the two and take what’s best.

Reading:

“Flash From Scratch: A Revision Exercise,” by Nancy Stohlman  
Kurt Vonnegut drafts

Assignment: Do you remember your poems to your future and younger selves? Don’t open them yet. Rewrite one of these without looking at the original. When you’re finished, open and compare. Then combine the best of both into a third draft. Email all three drafts to me, specifying which is which.

**Sculpting: Or how to do a Gordon Lish and edit the Unmagic from your piece**

When you write first (and even second and third) drafts I hope that you’ll let go and not self-edit. But when you DO decide to edit you need to learn how to be master carvers, or rather Gordon Lish’s. Gordon Lish was Raymond Carver’s editor and some say he’s responsible for making Carver the magician that he was. Think of it as performing surgery or sculpting: when you draft you add and add and add and then, when you’re ready, you subtract. You dig for gold beneath the clay.
Reading: Carver’s work pre- and post-Lish edits.

Assignment (Optional, extra credit): Take paragraphs that I will assign from Jack London’s “In a Far Country” and chisel it—Lish-style.

**Monday, May 11**

Last day of class! You did it! Let’s talk lit journals and the submission process.

**Book List:**

_The House on Mango Street_, by Sandra Cisneros  
_We The Animals_, by Justin Torres  
_Twins_, by Marcy Dermansky  
_It’s Kind of a Funny Story_, by Ned Vizzini  
_My Brilliant Friend_, by Elena Ferrante