

Fall Semester 2021–22
Poetry Writing
5th Period (12:50–1:35)
Class website: cheriewalsh.weebly.com

Mrs. Cherie Walsh
Room 211
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Office hours: by appointment;
sign-up sheet on office or classroom door

“The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.” —G.K. Chesterton

This fall, students will explore the genre of lyric poetry by reading classic and contemporary examples and by writing and revising their own pieces. Our approach, in the beginning, is formal: students will write sonnets, villanelles/pantoums, and play in class with various complex forms. Later, students will move on to the Dinggedicht, the long lyric poem in sections, and the free-verse poem. We will also work on translations. Students will keep journals—looking at examples from Dorothy Wordsworth and taking instruction from Mary Oliver, Joan Didion, Katherine Mansfield, and others—in order to sharpen their skills of observation and develop the habit of reflection even as they begin to learn ways of using the material of daily life as grist for poetic expression.

Work this semester in the poetry-writing class will be evaluated on process, effort, and the quality of the final piece. This way, each student will strive to improve her acuity of expression and sense of a lyric poem’s unfolding. Students will revise their pieces to produce a final portfolio at semester’s end. We will memorize one poem (or excerpt) from each major unit to solidify our understanding of the forms.

We will try to attend at least one reading, despite COVID and your own over-booked schedules. We will hold a celebratory reading of selections from our portfolios at the end of the class.

The course will rely on many handouts with classic and contemporary examples of the form studied, in addition to two textbooks:

The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms, Eavan Boland and Mark Strand
19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei, Eliot Weinberger

To succeed in this class:

- arrive on time with needed materials
- take notes on concepts as well as on specific poem examples
- learn terms associated with the concepts
- participate avidly in class to get your questions answered and to try out your ideas before committing them to paper
- keep up with daily journal writing to support your more formal writing practice
- offer constructive criticism to others in workshop
- take your drafts to the teacher to get one-on-one feedback in conference
- write multiple drafts of poems (and hand them in)
- be willing to share your work in progress in workshop
- hand in all work punctually and as directed

Poem assignments:

- Sonnet
- Villanelle/pantoum
- Dinggedicht
- Translation
- Long lyric
- Prose poem
- Free verse poem

This course is easily the best thing I do, and I've been doing it since the mid-90s. I think the course is successful because I have the same questions that my students have, albeit on a different level. We are all struggling to connect daily life with expression and expression with the transcendent qualities of art. If we are responding fully to what reality presents, we are all stretching what we can do intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and we are all engaging everything we can lexically, syntactically, and in terms of form, line, and sound. Students often write poems that far exceed in quality what they think they can do. As Marie Howe says in "The Dream," "Sometimes the island wavers and shimmers underfoot,/but the bridge appears when you walk across it—that's//how it works, right? There's no end to this."