

**San José State University**  
**Department of English and Comparative Literature**  
**ENGLISH 240: Poetry Workshop**  
**Spring 2021**

Instructor:	Ellen Bass, Lurie Visiting Author-in-Residence
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Office Hours:	M 3—4 PM by appointment
Class Days/Time:	M 4:00—6:45 PM
Classroom:	<a href="#">Zoom Link for Class</a>
Credit Units:	4 Credits

### **Course Description**

English 240 is an MFA-level poetry workshop in which students write, revise and complete new poems. This workshop is an opportunity to develop your skills in the craft of poetry. You'll be learning strategies that you can use to write poems that are vivid, arresting, meaningful and complex. I'll be presenting practical teachings that you'll be able to practice immediately. Each week you'll be writing or revising a poem and we'll be discussing these in class. You'll also be reading the work of contemporary poets as well as essays on the craft. Some of the specific concerns we'll be addressing are image and metaphor, detail and description, diction, syntax, form and structure, making lines and stanzas, music, and discovery. Each class member will complete a portfolio of at least 8 poems and also give an in-class presentation on the work of a contemporary poet. This workshop will be both rigorous and supportive. If you're excited about reading poetry and eager to take a leap forward in your development as a poet, I hope you'll join us. Students must submit a short writing sample prior to the first class meeting to receive permission to enroll. The course may be taken four times for credit (toward the MFA degree).

### **Thematic Focus**

#### Writing and Revising Poems and Close Readings

Members of this MFA-level poetry writing workshop will not only produce new work but will also investigate contemporary poems that demonstrate excellent aspects of the craft. MFA students will create a portfolio of new poems plus contribute to a Discussion Blog on topics the class explores, based on poems and criticism we read during the semester. All students will give close attention to poetic craft and techniques of composition. MFA and MA students will participate together in weekly class workshops in which new work by class members will be read and discussed with an eye toward revision. Students will also have access to and be required to listen to recorded presentations on the craft of poetry and on the art of revision by the instructor.

## Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

### Course Goals:

- Complete a portfolio consisting of (depending on length) **eight** finished (revised) original poems.
- Explore varied modes and forms of contemporary poetry.
- Present early drafts of poems for feedback in workshop.
- Give feedback to peers' poems in class on a weekly basis.
- Read essays on the craft of poetry.
- Read collections of poems by contemporary poets and read extensive handouts of poems that instructor will provide.
- Write a 2,500 – 3,000-word paper in which you analyze a poetry collection. Your analysis should include some close reading/craft analysis of at least one poem in the collection; a discussion of signature characteristics of the poet's work; mode and style of the poems; themes, approaches to topical subject, etc. (if appropriate).
- Give a 10-minute poetry analysis/close reading presentation, analyzing the craft of a poem by one of the poets whose collection(s) you are reading for your longer poetry book analysis paper.

### English Department Students Learning Goals

This course supports several of the English Department's Student Learning Goals. The Department of English and Comparative Literature seeks to foster the intellectual development of its majors by encouraging study of literature and writing—whether creative, technical, or other professional writing. The Department strives to make its majors familiar with a wide range of works of British, American, and World literature, including folk and popular forms; and with the nature of the canon and of canon-formation, including issues of culture, history, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

### Learning Objectives:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

Student Learning Objectives:	Skills/Knowledge Acquired:	Activities:
SLO 1: Students will demonstrate a high-level of ability to write and complete a publishable, full-length work of literature in a primary genre concentration (poetry).	1. Students will learn to apply the craft of poetry writing in free verse and traditional meters and forms.	1. Write and revised at least eight original poems. 2. Apply close-reading and knowledge of poetic craft to completing revisions of original poems.

SLO 2: Students will demonstrate high-level of proficiency to write works of literature in a secondary genre concentration (poetry).	See above.	See above.
SLO 3: Students will demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recognize trends in contemporary creative writing (poetry).</li> <li>2. Identify developments within poetry, and the development of individual authors and schools/styles of writing.</li> <li>3. To effectively analyze and apply the elements of poetic craft (diction, syntax, image, form, etc.) to make revisions of one's own poems and offer constructive criticism to peers in workshopping their poems.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Give an in-class close-reading/ craft presentation discussing a poem from <i>The Art of Syntax</i>.</li> <li>2. Give a 10-minute poetry analysis/close reading presentation, analyzing the craft a poem by one of the poets whose collection(s) you are reading from the recommended reading list.</li> <li>3. Write a 2,500 – 3,000-word analysis paper in which you analyze one of the poet's poetry collections from the Recommended Reading list.</li> </ol>
SLO 4: Students will demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Close read peers' poems and essays</li> <li>2. Evaluate strengths (successes) and weaknesses (problems) in peers' poems as well as published poems by notable authors.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Workshop peers' poems weekly.</li> <li>2.</li> </ol>

### Required Books

Mark Doty, *The Art of Description*, paper.

### Required Listening

Ellen Bass has recorded a series of craft talks on various aspects of poetry that you will be given access to and are required to watch/listen to. The talks will be accompanied by extensive handouts of poems, some of which you'll be required to read.

### Recommended Reading

Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion*, paper.

Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*

Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences about Writing*, paper

Tony Hoagland, *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*, paper

*You are also required to choose one of the following poetry collections to read closely and to analyze one or more aspects of craft used in representative poems. You are also required to give a seminar presentation to the class based on a close reading and craft analysis of an aspect of one of the poems in the collection you've chosen. And to write a craft analysis paper of work in this collection. If you'd prefer to choose a different book by one of these poets, that's fine.*

Victoria Chang, *Obit*, paper.

Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic*, paper.

Donika Kelly, *Bestiary*. paper.

Tracy K. Smith, *Wade in the Water*, paper.

Marie Howe, *What the Living Do*, paper

Toi Derricotte, *The Undertaker's Daughter*, paper  
or *I: New and Selected Poems*, hardcover or kindle

Jericho Brown, *The Tradition*, paper.

Lucille Clifton, *Blessing the Boats*, paper.

Kwame Dawes, *Nebraska*, paper.

Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, paper.

Mark Doty, *Fire to Fire*, paper.

Frank Gaspar, *Late Rapturous*, paper.

Sharon Olds, *The Gold Cell*, paper

Nicole Sealy, *Ordinary Beast*, paper.

Patricia Smith, *Teahouse of the Almighty*, paper.

Alberto Rios, *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body*, paper

Aracelis Girmay, *Black Maria*, paper

Ada Limon, *Bright Dead Things*, paper.

Joy Harjo, *How We Became Human*, paper

Kaveh Akbar, *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, paper.

## ON-LINE RESOURCES:

Course Homepage on Canvas URL	Update to date course information, syllabus, class activities, worksheets, reading/writing assigned, instructor and student blogs, presentation notes and slides, etc.
Academy of American Poets URL	Large resource with thousands of poems, essays, biographies, weekly features, and poems for special occasions. <a href="http://www.poets.org">www.poets.org</a>
The Poetry Foundation URL	Publisher of <i>Poetry</i> magazine, an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in American culture. A large website containing thousands of poems, biographical essays, teaching ideas, blogs, and archived issues of Poetry. <a href="http://www.poetryfoundation.org/">http://www.poetryfoundation.org/</a>
Associated Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) URL	AWP provides community, opportunities, ideas, news, and advocacy for writers and teachers of writing. <a href="http://www.awpwriter.org">http://www.awpwriter.org</a>
Poets & Writers Online URL	Information, support, and guidance for creative <i>writers</i> . Find <i>writing</i> contests, grants for <i>writers</i> , news, small presses, and much more. <a href="http://pw.org">http://pw.org</a>

### Overview of Workshop Procedures

This class is conducted primarily as a writers' workshop, which requires active student participation. For the workshop, students will write (and revise), new poems to be shared in the workshop. The instructor and the students will give constructive feedback orally and in writing. The class members will also discuss these poems and the essays on the Canvas course site.

The poems you share should be single-spaced, with a double space between stanzas. Although we don't expect the poems to be absolutely polished or finished, they should be the very best work you are capable of, given your development as a poet and the somewhat limited time between workshop sessions.

All poems submitted to the workshop must be your own original work (no translations), and written for this course exclusively. You may not hand in any poem you wrote for another course.

### Etiquette for Student Writing Groups and Class Workshop Discussions

- When you comment on peers' work, focus on what you find to be the strengths as well as offering constructive criticism of the work.

- When your poem(s) are being discussed in the class workshop, listen politely or ask permission to ask a question to clarify what a class member is explaining. Do not interrupt to defend your poem. You will have the opportunity to clarify or explain your intentions in the poem following the critical discussion. Remember, if your poem is published online or printed in a journal, you will not be present to explain the poem.
- SJSU respects students' diversity and privacy. A poetry workshop should be a safe space. What happens in the workshop is not to be discussed outside the workshop without other participants' explicit permission. Do not submit work or make (or write) comments that will intentionally cause offense or hurt to another student (or instructor). Remember, the criticism in a workshop is not personal. It is about the work, not the author.
- If such purposely offensive or hurtful work or comments are found, the instructor will first discuss it with you, then remove the poem or comment from the Canvas Workshop Discussion. If you persist in posting knowingly and purposely offensive material that is intended to disrupt the Workshop, you will receive 0 credit for work. Poets often address sensitive issues or challenge readers' sensibilities and mores in their poems. If you have written something that you think might possibly offend someone else in the class, check with the instructor before you post it. This does not mean you should refrain from exploring sensitive or controversial subjects or that these are off limits. It does mean, though, that we want this workshop to be a safe space for everyone.
- If you do not abide by these etiquette guidelines, you will receive one warning from the instructor. If you do not follow the etiquette guidelines after you have received one warning, warning the instructor may ban you from attending the class. (You would have to complete the course requirements online via Canvas, where your comments will be strictly monitored.)

### **Important Guidelines on Creating A Rigorous and Supportive Writing Workshop**

Workshop participants learn to articulate issues of craft and process, becoming more skillful writers, editors, workshop leaders, teachers, and reviewers. When you attentively participate in the discussion of another's writing, you often learn more about craft than you do from the hour of critique focused on your own work. Without the attachment and personal concerns that arise when your work is addressed, you may identify similar issues in your own writing and gain new ideas for dealing with them.

**Confidentiality.** You agree not to share anything anyone writes with people outside the group (unless you explicitly ask that person's permission).

**Be conscious of sharing time.** If you are a naturally talkative person, stay aware of how much you are talking so that there's room for quieter people to speak as well. If you're a naturally quiet person, give yourself a little push to speak up.

**There's no critique about the subject of the poem, i.e. whether it's a suitable subject or the attitude taken in the poem meets your criteria.** The only exception would be for writing that falls into the category of hate speech.

You're not a committee rewriting the poem. You are readers dedicated to deep listening, to trying to hear the poem on its own terms, and offering whatever feedback you can. But you're not trying to come to consensus. The poet, at home and after due consideration, will make their own decisions.

Prior to the discussion of your work, do not apologize, issue disclaimers, or tell the story behind it. When your work is under discussion, listen quietly and wait until you've heard the feedback before asking questions or making comments. Take detailed notes on what is said by *all* contributors to the discussion; reserve judgment on the usefulness of each comment until you are back working with the piece in private. Once you are no longer on the spot, you may be able to more objectively process the feedback. As you take notes, try not to filter the comments too much. When invited to respond at the end of the discussion, spend the bulk of your time asking questions rather than defending.

In giving feedback, if there is an "I" in the poem, talk about the speaker, not "you." For example, don't say things like, "In the second stanza, when you first see your daughter..." Instead say, "In the second stanza, when the speaker first sees her daughter..." Or you could say "In the second stanza, when the mother first sees her daughter..." And never ask questions like, *did this really happen? how are you feeling about it now? what did your father do after that?* Respecting the distance between the poet and the speaker or "I" in the poem is essential.

Also, because you can write anything you want in a poem, the poet may not even have had that experience they're writing about. They may have created it from their imagination. So it would be awkward if the poem is about a speaker whose husband left her and a group member says, *I'm so sorry your husband left you*, and the poet's husband didn't leave her. I always think of this passage from the Afterword of Lucy Grealy's memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*. Lucy Grealy writes about a woman who comes up to her after a reading and says: "It's amazing how you remember everything so clearly ... 'All those conversations, details. Were you ever worried that you might get something wrong?'" And Grealy replies, "I didn't remember it. I wrote it. I'm a writer."

Don't try to address a problem in the poem until you've identified the problem. Sometimes people start giving suggestions before they recognize what the problem is, so the suggestions have a random quality and are not likely to be helpful. So slow down and try to identify the problem first.

It's often more helpful to talk about why you think something is a problem, rather than just saying it's a problem. Why do you think a line or metaphor is strong or not as strong? This way you are also learning, pushing yourself to identify and articulate what you think is really going on in the poem.

Also, problems are often opportunities. Maybe instead of taking that stanza out, the poem needs three more stanzas. Only the poet can know that. Only they have access to the deep well that the poem came from. Anyone else can only see what's already on the page so any solutions from the outside are limited by that.

Of all the possible true things you might say about someone's work, try to choose the thing that will help them move the work forward. Useful criticism leaves the writer feeling encouraged about their abilities to improve the work and gives them a sense of how to focus their efforts.

Critical feedback is a gift. Someone is taking their time and devoting their attention to your poem. Adopt an attitude of appreciation. Even if you're disappointed that your poem isn't as far along as you'd hoped, say *thank you*.

### **Seminar Presentations**

Each student will give one classroom presentation during the semester. Notes, slides, and other handouts and materials for these presentations are required to be posted in Canvas the Sunday before the presentation date. (Fulfills SLO's 3,4.)

- Your presentation can be either a short close-reading and line-level analysis of one aspect of a poem from the poet whose collection you are investigating for your longer poetry collection analysis paper. And/or it can be a discussion of a particular aspect of the craft that that poet demonstrates in their work. Post links to sample poems from the poet's book on Canvas when it's your week to present. Some or all of your presentation can be included in your analysis paper. *Examples: How does a particular poem's imagery embody its emotion? How is rhythm working to enhance or reinforce the poem's emotion? How do the line lengths or line breaks add to or intensify the poem? How does a particular poem's structure or form function to best express its subject or theme?* (You may post the text of this presentation on Canvas to receive comments.)
  - You should also include a poetry writing assignment you've created for yourself (and can share), based on a craft or formal technique of interest to you that you find is characteristic or a "signature" of this poet's work. You should do this assignment yourself and present it as your poem either the same week as your presentation or soon after.

### **Required Writing**

#### **Poetry Portfolio**

By the end of the semester, you will submit a completed portfolio of at least 8 revised and completed poems, which are the best work you are capable of. These are poems that may be ready to submit to publications (print and digital) and/or include in your thesis collection. (Fulfills SLO's 1, 2.)

#### **Poetry Workshop Discussions on Canvas**

Post your praise and constructive criticism of peer's poems in the Workshop Discussions on Canvas or by other means which we'll list in class. You're expected to respond in writing and during the class workshop to all the poems discussed in workshop that week. (Fulfills SLO's 1, 2, 4.)

#### **Living Room Craft Talk Discussions on Canvas**

Each class member is required to post comments, questions, and thoughts in response to the recordings each week. Most useful might be to talk about how you think you can apply what you're learning to your own poems. (Fulfills SLO's 3,4.)

## **1-Unit Credit Enhancement: (for in-class presentations on a poet, based on craft-talks)**

### **Craft Analysis of a Poetry Collection**

Write a 2,500 – 3,000-word craft analysis paper in which you discuss a poet's work in a poetry collection you've chosen from the Recommended Reading list. Your analysis should include some close reading/craft analysis of at least one poem in the collection; discussion of the signature characteristics of the poet's work; mode and style of the poems; themes, approaches to topical subject, etc. (if appropriate).

Also attach a poem which is written to respond to a poetry assignment you've created for yourself, based on a craft or formal technique that you find characteristic of this poet's work. And write a brief (250 – 500 word) analysis of how your poem emulates a characteristic of this poet's work. (Fulfills SLO's 3,4.)

### **Credit Hour Requirements:**

Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally 3 hours per unit per week with 1 of the hours used for lecture) for instruction or preparation/studying or course related activities including but not limited to internships, labs, clinical practica. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus.

**Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments.**

### **Due Dates**

You will turn in the poems in two sets: The instructor will provide you with critical comments and a grade-in-progress for the first set.

- Poems Set 1 Due: March 15 (a minimum of 4 completed poems).
- Poems Set 2 Due: May 17: (At least 8 completed poems)
- Craft analysis of a poetry collection paper—draft: April 26.
- Craft analysis of a poetry collection paper—final draft: May 10.

### **Grades**

- **60%** -- Final poetry portfolio.
- **15%** -- Participation in the workshop; in class and on Canvas.
- **15%** -- Seminar Presentation: craft analysis close reading presentation, including presentation slides, notes, handouts, etc.; also comments on workshop poems.
- **10%** -- Craft analysis of poetry collection paper. (One-unit enhancement.)

A NOTE ON GRADES: In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs, stanzas, or poetic form. Grades issued will represent a full range of student performance and will adhere to the following SJSU academic standards of assessment.

Grades given conform to the English Department and university grading policy. The Department of English is committed to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU *Catalog* ("The Grading System"). Grades used must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure.

*University policy requires Graduate Students to maintain a minimum 3.0 GPA to remain in good standing in their degree program.*

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University and the University's Integrity Policy, require you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the Office of Judicial Affairs." The policy on academic integrity can be found at: [http://sa.sjsu.edu/judicial\\_affairs/index.html](http://sa.sjsu.edu/judicial_affairs/index.html)

## University Policies

### Academic integrity

**Avoiding Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of somebody else's words or ideas and is considered an instance of academic dishonesty that instructors must report. Repeated instances of plagiarism will result in a student's expulsion from the University. You commit plagiarism by:

1. Buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper or creative work;
2. Hiring someone to write a paper or creative work;
3. Building on someone's ideas without providing a citation;
4. Or copying from another source or using a source too closely when paraphrasing.

In other words, submit only your own work. To learn how to cite sources accurately and forthrightly, consult your handbook.

The instructor reserves the right to revise the requirements and to notify students of such revision in a timely manner, e.g., "subject to change, announced at least one class meeting in advance. Students should know that the University's [Academic Integrity Policy is available at http://www.sa.sjsu.edu/download/judicial\\_affairs/Academic\\_Integrity\\_Policy\\_S07-2.pdf](http://www.sa.sjsu.edu/download/judicial_affairs/Academic_Integrity_Policy_S07-2.pdf). Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University and the University's integrity policy, require you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The website for [Student Conduct and Ethical Development is available at http://www.sa.sjsu.edu/judicial\\_affairs/index.html](http://www.sa.sjsu.edu/judicial_affairs/index.html).

Instances of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Cheating on exams or plagiarism (presenting the work of another as your own, or the use of another person's ideas without giving proper credit) will result in a failing grade and sanctions by the University. For this class, all assignments are to be completed by the individual student unless otherwise specified. If you would like to include in your assignment any material you have submitted, or plan to submit for another class, please note that SJSU's Academic Policy F06-1 requires approval of instructors.

### **More University Policies**

The link below contains university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as additional information on academic integrity, accommodations, etc.

<http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>

## Course Calendar

We will conduct an on-going poetry workshop in class until the end of the semester. Poems to be discussed should be uploaded to our Canvas course Workshop Discussion for the week. We will discuss one poem by 6 class members each week. Please upload poems as Word files (.doc format or .docx) to Canvas in the appropriate week's Workshop Discussion. Seminar readings presentations and poem analysis presentations will be assigned by the instructor for the first part of the semester.

You will also be given access to recorded craft talks by the instructor (Ellen Bass). The first series of six talks will be on The Art of Revision and the second series will be on six aspects of the craft of poetry. (The order of the talks may change a little. I'll give you plenty of notice, if so). Each talk is two hours long and you are expected to watch/listen to one talk each week for the first twelve weeks of class. You'll be given access to these talks as well as extensive handouts in advance. By listening to the talks outside of our weekly meetings, we free up more time to discuss your poems in the workshop. (There will be a third series of craft talks available in April/May which you may also attend on Friday mornings or watch/listen to the recordings of. This third series is recommended, but not required).

<b>Week 1</b> <b>Feb. 1</b>	Orientation; introductions. Course syllabus review. POETRY WORKSHOP If time, discuss first two chapters of <i>The Art of Description</i> by Mark Doty
<b>Week 2</b> <b>Feb. 8</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #1 The Art of Revision
<b>Week 3</b> <b>Feb. 15</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #2 The Art of Revision Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA
<b>Week 4</b> <b>Feb. 22</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #3 The Art of Revision
<b>Week 5</b> <b>Mar. 1</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #4 The Art of Revision
<b>Week 6</b> <b>March 8</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #5 The Art of Revision
<b>Week 7</b> <b>Mar. 15</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #6 The Art of Revision
<b>Week 8</b> <b>Mar. 22</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to recorded craft talk #1a Metaphor

<b>Week 9</b> March 29 No class	Spring Break
<b>Week 10</b> <b>Apr. 5</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to Recorded craft talk #2 Detail & Description
<b>Week 11</b> <b>Apr. 12</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to Recorded craft talk #3 Creating Tension
<b>Week 12</b> <b>April 19</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Reading and Interview with Toi Derricotte/ Legacy of Poetry
<b>Week 13</b> <b>April 26:</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to Recorded craft talk #4 Controlled Chaos
<b>Week 14</b> <b>May 3:</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP. Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to Recorded craft talk #5 Syntax
<b>Week 15</b> <b>May 10</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA Q&A and discussion in response to Recorded craft talk #6 Discovery
<b>Week 16</b> <b>May 17</b>	POETRY WORKSHOP Poem close reading presentation/discussion: TBA