Course Description: This course will focus on the art and craft of your writing. That is, while we will discuss issues of craft and read the works of great writers, the emphasis will be on the writing you will do throughout the semester. Moreover, the readings, as well as the discussion of issues of craft, will be adapted to serve the purposes of your writing—to nourish it, let it breathe, expand and reflect on its discoveries, and find strategies to work on its weak points or seeming dead-ends. In this connection, it will be essential to remember that when it comes to writing, mistakes are simply portals of discovery, as James Joyce put it.

The course will be divided in workshop sessions and craft sessions. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we’ll devote the entirety of a class meeting to one mode or the other—often, we’ll both workshop a piece (or some pieces) and we’ll have a mini-craft session. However, as an initial conceptual distinction, during workshop sessions we will discuss pieces of writing (both fiction and poetry) that you will have written for the occasion. (More on the workshop format below). During craft sessions, in turn, we will discuss assigned readings with a view to teasing out key elements of craft and style. Also, during craft sessions we will do writing exercises of various kinds (e.g., imitative exercises, “normalizing” exercises, thematic exercises, etc.).

The idea is that these two kinds of sessions or modes of working feedback on each other, with craft sessions serving primarily to address concerns raised in and by your writing. Furthermore, as the course progresses, the limits between one kind of session and the other will become more fluid: we’ll be able to talk about your writing in terms of craft—i.e., we’ll develop a shared vocabulary to talk about your writing—and we’ll see how the craft exercises and the close reading that we’ll do during craft sessions carry onto your writing, and, therefore, onto our workshop sessions.

More on Workshop and Craft Sessions:

Workshop Sessions: At least once in the semester, your creative work will be workshopped. A week in advance, you will hand out hard copies of a piece of your choice to your peers and to me, and on your assigned date we’ll discuss your work. Also, each of us—your classmates and your instructor—will give you a letter in which we critically reflect on your writing. (More detailed guidelines on workshop letters and workshop discussion will be given during the first week of classes).
Craft Sessions: In what follows, I present four thematic units. Each unit builds on the previous one. We will not cover a complete unit in a single session. Instead, each unit will take more than one class meeting, and, more often than not, we'll devote *part of a given class meeting* to craft sessions. Thus, class meetings will hopefully become more dynamic, changing "gears" as we move from talking about a particular piece of yours to the discussion of an assigned reading to the writing of an exercise (see below). Given that your workshop piece(s) will be handed out in advance, I will plan craft sessions that are related to the piece(s) in question.

Exercises for Craft Sessions: During craft sessions we'll examine the (admittedly porous) "elements" of fiction and poetry (e.g., plot, point of view, voice, poetic forms, etc.). We'll also do exercises of various kinds. Mainly, we'll concentrate on imitative exercises, normalizing exercises, and thematic exercises).

*Imitative* exercises focus on particular aspects of the writing of the assigned authors. For instance, you may be required to write a passage using the same syntactic structure of, say, Virginia Woolf. Imitative exercises are not only useful to enrich our repertoire, but they can result in pieces of writing in their own right. As a spinoff, we'll take a look at "imitations" performed by accomplished writers. (Example: the imitations in *Wind in a Box*, by poet Terrance Hayes).

*Normalizing* exercises are designed to "transcribe" a piece of complex writing into "plain" writing. For instance, how would Hemingway "rewrite" a page of Thomas Bernhardt's *The Loser*?

*Thematic* exercises are, as the name indicates, related to a given theme. For instance, you may be asked to read Franz Kafka’s one-page piece, “A Crossbreed,” and write about an analogous creature; or Julio Cortazar’s short story, “Axolotl,” in which the narrator turns into an amphibian animal, and then asked to write a scene in which there is an analogous metamorphosis. This exercise may be combined with an exercise in point of view if, as in Cortazar’s story, there is a change in point of view when the narrator turns into the creature.

Imitative, normalizing, and thematic exercises, however, do not exhaust the kinds of exercises we’ll do in this course.

First Craft Unit: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Writing.*

What makes “good” pieces work? Identifying (and fleshing out) elements of the craft and art of writing (e.g., voice, point of view, imagery, structure, plot— for fiction—, poetic forms, etc.).

Readings and discussion triggers for the First Craft Unit will include the following:
Poetry:

Frank O’Hara, “Ave Maria”
James Tate, “The Lost Pilot”
Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”

Fiction:

Margaret Atwood, “Bluebeard’s Egg”
Jorge Luis Borges, “The Dead Man”
Frank Conroy, “Midair”
William Faulkner, “Barn Burning”
Ernest Hemingway, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”
James Joyce, “Araby”
Grace Paley, “Living”

Second Craft Unit: “But What is it About?” Are There Big Themes and Small Themes?

Readings and discussion triggers for the Second Craft Unit will include the following:

Tomaz Salamun’s “Sonnet to Milk”
Samuel Beckett’s “Texts for Nothing”

Third Craft Unit: Focusing on the Sentence Level (Fiction) and the Line Level (Poetry).

Fourth Craft Unit: Beyond Boundaries: Prose or Poetry?

Readings and discussion triggers for the Fourth Craft Unit will include the following:

Zachary Schomburg, The Man Suit.
James Tate, Ghost Soldiers.
Joe Wenderoth, Letters to Wendy’s
Requirements:

**Workshop:** When you are up for workshop, you must hand in your piece(s) at least a week in advance. When you aren't up for workshop, you must bring two copies of a workshop letter: one for the writer whose work is being workshopped on that day, one for me. Your writing will be workshopped at least once in the semester.

**Group Conferences:** At least once in the semester, we'll meet in groups of three to discuss your work. This smaller gathering might yield different insights and perspectives on your work.

**Individual Conferences:** Around mid-semester, I will have an individual conference with each of you, in which we'll discuss your work and your progress in the class. You must turn in, at least a week in advance, a *mid-semester portfolio* that will contain the writing to be discussed during your individual conference. It should also contain a piece (at least one-page long) in which you discuss your evolution as a writer.

**Final Writing Portfolio:** At the end of the semester you will turn in a Final Portfolio, which will include all the writing you've done for this course, plus a final reflection in which you'll assess your performance in the class, plus one of the following options:

a) A complete, revised short story (10-15 pages), and at least 6 pages of poetry;

b) At least two “short-shorts” (3-8 pages each), and at least 6 pages of poetry.

**Grading:**

The final grade will be determined by the instructor’s assessment of the student’s work, based on his or her writing (including the workshop letters), his or her self-appraisal (see above the requirements for the mid-semester portfolio, under “Individual Conferences,” and the requirements for the Final Writing Portfolio), and attendance, participation, and performance during class and conferences.
Sample Exercises:¹

1) a) Read the following “short-short:”

"The River," by Julio Cortazar.

Translated by the instructor.

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So yes, it seems it’s like this, you left saying I don’t know what – that you were going to jump into the Seine or something to that effect, one of those phrases in the middle of the night, mixed with sheets and dry mouth, almost always said in the dark or with something of a hand or a foot barely touching the body of the one who’s barely listening, because I’ve been barely listening for so long when you say things like that; it all comes from behind my eyes, from the sleep that once again drags me down. So it’s all right, what do I care whether you’ve left, whether you’ve drowned or you’re still there around the docks watching the water. And besides it’s not true because you’re here, fast asleep and breathing. But then you didn’t leave when you left sometime in the middle of the night before I lost myself in sleep. So you were afraid, you gave up and suddenly you’re here, almost touching me, almost undulating, as if something was working slowly in your sleep, as if you were really dreaming that you left and that after all you reached the docks and jumped into the water. So here we go again, you falling asleep later with your face wet from crying stupidly until eleven in the morning, the time when the paper comes with the news of the ones who have really drowned.

You make me laugh, poor little thing. Your tragic determinations, your way of slamming doors like a second-rate actress – makes me wonder whether you really believe in your own threats, your repugnant blackmails, your inextinguishable pathetic scenes covered in tears and adjectives and accusations. You deserve someone more skilled than me to give you the right comeback: then one would see the perfect couple rising with the exquisite stench of the man and the woman who destroy each other – looking each other in the eye to secure the most precarious delay, to survive and start over and tirelessly chase their truth of wasteland and frying pans. But you see, I choose silence, I light a cigarette and listen to you, to your complaints (and you’re right, but what am I going to do?), or, better yet, I slowly fall asleep almost lulled by your predictable rants. With my eyes half-closed I still mix for a while the first surge of dreams with your gestures of ridiculous gown under the

¹ Exercises 2-5 are repeated in my application for English 254. The prompts are the same, but the execution, level of skill, and accomplishment will obviously vary. Like a "Pierre Menard..." of sorts, the same exercises can fulfill different functions.
light of the lamp that we were given as a wedding gift, and in the end I fall asleep and I take with me – I confess this almost with love – the most useful part of your moves and your denouncements, the loud sound that deforms your lips livid with rage: to enrich my own dreams where nobody thinks of drowning, believe me.

But if this is so, I wonder what you’re doing in this bed that you’d decided to leave for the other one – the vaster, more elusive one. Now it turns out that you’re sleeping, that every once in a while you move a leg, changing the drawing of the sheets; you look angry about something – not too angry, it’s like a bitter tiredness. Your lips hint at spite, they let the air go in a rather choppy way, they take it in with brief inspirations, and I think that if I wasn’t so exasperated by your false threats I would admit that you’re beautiful again, as if the sleep brought you back to my side where desire is possible and even reconciliation – something less grim than this dawn where the first carriages start to move and the roosters betray their horrendous servitude. I don’t know, it doesn’t even make sense to ask again whether you left at some point, whether it was you who slammed the door at the very moment when I slipped into oblivion, and perhaps it’s because of that that I prefer to touch you, not because I doubt that you’re here – you probably never left the room, perhaps the wind slammed the door, I dreamed that you had left while you, believing me awake, shouted your threat from the end of the bed. It’s not because of that that I touch you; in the green twilight of the dawn it’s almost sweet to slip a hand on that shoulder that shivers and rejects me. The sheet is half covering you; my fingers start to go down the soft design of your throat; I lean forward and take in your breath that smells like night, like syrup; I don’t know how my arms have surrounded you, I hear a complaint while you bend your waist in refusal but we both know this game too well to believe in it; it’s imperative that you give up your mouth that moans a few words; it’s useless for your lazy, defeated body to struggle to escape. I manage to glimpse at the sheet that slips through the air and now we’re naked, the sunrise swathes us and reconciles us in a single trembling matter, but you insist on fighting, throwing your arms round my head, opening your thighs briefly to close their pins again. I have to dominate you slowly (and this, you know, I’ve always done with a ceremonious grace). Without hurting you I bend your arms, I adjust my rhythm to your pleasure of clenched hands, of eyes wide open; now your rhythm goes deeper in slow, watery movements, in deep bubbles that rise on my face; I vaguely caress your hair on the pillow; in the green twilight I look with surprise at my soaking hand, and before slipping to your side I know that they have just taken you out of the water – too late, naturally – and that you lie on the stony trail of the dock surrounded by shoes and voices, naked on your belly with your wet hair and your open eyes.

b) Now, write a scene in which two different time-lines merge seamlessly. It may or may not be part of a complete story.
2) Write a dialogue scene in which emphasis and repetition substitute for eloquence. (Think of Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”).

3) Exercise in Point of View: Pick a story that you like, (yours or somebody else’s) and rewrite it changing the point of view (e.g., if it’s in third person, rewrite the story in first-person). What changes can you notice? What’s effective in one case, and what in the other?

4) Choose an object. Write a one-page long description of the object. Your description should make the reader regard the object as something pleasant. Then, describe the same object in such a way that you’d make your reader feel repelled by the object. (It has to be the same object under roughly the same circumstances; it cannot be, for instance, a description of a steak at a restaurant—“positive”—and a description of the same steak, rotten, in a trash can—“negative.”).

5) Read Tomaz Salamun’s “Sonnet to Milk,” and write a poem (in prose or in any poetic form that you’d like) in which you cast a pedestrian object or entity under an unusual light—as something ominous, or auspicious, or completely unrelated to its usual function, for instance.