Creative Writing ENGL 354 -Sample Exercises

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For Instructor’s Practicum Sessions Only: A more detailed schedule (i.e., a tentative week-by-week calendar) will be provided after the first week of classes, once I’ve made a rough assessment of the literary interests and level of competence of my students. I’ll make adjustments based on this assessment. While I won’t tailor the syllabus to the interests of my students, I believe it’s important to take heed of their likes and dislikes—not in order to regard them as “limits,” but to fashion more effective ways to expand and challenge their literary repertoire.

Sample Exercises:

1) Read Julio Cortázar’s “The River,” and 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.
6) On Endings.

a) Read the following excerpt from Raymond Carver’s “Little Things:”

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high window that faced the backyard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark. But it was getting dark on the inside too.

He was in the bedroom pushing clothes into a suitcase when she came to the door.

I'm glad you're leaving! I'm glad you're leaving! she said. Do you hear?

He kept on putting his things into the suitcase.

Son of a bitch! I'm so glad you're leaving! She began to cry. You can't even look me in the face, can you?

Then she noticed the baby's picture on the bed and picked it up.

He looked at her and she wiped her eyes and stared at him before turning and going back to the living room.

Bring that back, he said.

Just get your things and get out, she said.

He did not answer. He fastened the suitcase, put on his coat, looked around the bedroom before turning off the light. Then he went out to the living room.

She stood in the doorway of the little kitchen, holding the baby.

I want the baby, he said.

Are you crazy?

No, but I want the baby. I'll get someone to come by for his things.

You're not touching this baby, she said.

The baby had begun to cry and she uncovered the blanket from around his head.

Oh, oh, she said, looking at the baby.

He moved toward her.

For God's sake! she said. She took a step back into the kitchen.

I want the baby.
Get out of here!

She turned and tried to hold the baby over in a corner behind the stove.

But he came up. He reached across the stove and tightened his hands on the baby.

Get away, get away! she cried.

The baby was red-faced and screaming. In the scuffle they knocked down a flowerpot that hung behind the stove.

He crowded her into the wall then, trying to break her grip. He held onto the baby and pushed with all his weight.

Let go of him, he said.

Don't, she said. You're hurting the baby, she said.

I'm not hurting the baby, he said.

The kitchen window gave no light. In the near-dark he worked on her fisted fingers with one hand and with the other hand he gripped the screaming baby up under an arm near the shoulder.

She felt her fingers being forced open. She felt the baby going from her.

No! she screamed just as her hands came loose.

She would have it, this baby. She grabbed for the baby's other arm.

b) How would you end this story? You can either suggest an ending, or write it down as if the story were yours. Your ending should be about a paragraph long.

Note: The idea is to collect all these single-paragraph exercises, read them out loud, and discuss them. Then, I’ll read out loud the ending Carver chose for his story:

She caught the baby around the wrist and leaned back.

But he would not let go. He felt the baby slipping out of his hands and he pulled back very hard.

In this manner, the issue was decided.