

Syllabus, Section #11
Fueling the Fire of Revision: A Poetry Workshop (advanced)
Led by Angela Rydell (ajrydell@wisc.edu)
June 15-19, 2009, 9:30-12:30 daily

Class sessions will include group critique of participants' work, analysis of model poems, discussion, and writing exercises. Advance submission of up to three poems (none longer than a page in length) is welcome, but not required.

Monday - Warming Up to Revision : Intention and Theme

The best revision fuels a poem's fire without burning *yourself* out. There's no step one, step two, step three, done, and that can be scary. It's also exhilarating.

We'll discuss ways to balance the electricity of the right brain with the cool reason of the left. Attitude is key. How can you write an ambitious poem while staying connected to the poem's deepest intentions? Robert Frost says, "Theme alone can steady us down." But if you're too attached that initial spark, its light may blind you to the possibility of discovery.

Analysis of sample drafts by established writers reveals how vital cuts, focused expansions and surprising turns heighten theme. Exercises explore how titles and first lines can work as beacons that light the way through the revision process.

Tuesday – Focusing the Direction of the Fire : Image and Order

In hands-on exercises with your own poems, you'll intensify image. Is it true that the more an image connects with emotion, the closer you are to a solid draft?

Clichéd images are flat and emotionless and kill fires, but new imagery builds fires. Discussion will help us identify dazzling metaphors that heat a poem up and control the flames. How can well-chosen imagery provide both clarity and mystery, and help manage ambiguity? Analysis will help you find the balance.

Through exercises in reordering, you may find a poem's opening image at the ending, or a closing image that works best as a first line. As you poke and prod the fire, new sparks fly out.

Wednesday – Focusing the Fire: Sound Texture and Line Breaks

We'll discuss how sound texture and line breaks focus and contain the blaze. Can "scanning" a free verse poem actually eliminate awkward images and abstract language?

Model drafts shed light on the choices established writers make in revision. Does awareness of audience help a writer anticipate alternate readings? We'll compare revisions to see how switching up line breaks underscores imagery and strengthens tension.

And once we set our own poems in front of us again, we'll tighten and tweak line breaks and sound textures, cutting those that sputter and intensifying those that sing.

Thursday – Reining in the Flames : Editing and Avoiding Burn Out

Today we'll work on harnessing the devil in the details so he heats things up rather than trips you up.

How can nit-picky choices like reducing adjectives, cutting articles and reconsidering a comma actually intensify your poem—and your commitment to revising it? We'll examine drafts by published writers and watch, before our eyes, how cutting abstractions, tidying up the syntax and strengthening transitions makes a poem grow from a hazy flicker to a mature fire.

Through discussion and exercises, we'll also explore how direction shifts in point of view and tense heighten our enthusiasm for revision.

Friday – Raging Against the Dying of the Light : Endings

Valery has said “poems are never finished, only abandoned.” But all week we will watch poems grow, brighten, intensify—“rage against the dying of the light.”

We want a poem's embers to linger beyond the first reading. So we often “tell” instead of “show” at the ending, just to make sure the reader gets it. But interest fizzles fast when we close with summary.

Discussion of established writers' work will illuminate how an unpredictable image, a surprising shift of direction, or the development of a powerful metaphor can keep an ending from seeming artificial or overwritten, and ignite the imagination of the reader.

Guidelines: At least one submitted poem will be workshopped in class—all will be revised during the week. Bring all three to day one. If possible, e-mail poems (as Word attachments) by May 23rd, to: ajrydell@wisc.edu, or mail to: Angela Rydell, 821 University Ave., Radio Hall, Madison, WI 53706.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their poetry. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of poetry or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

