

The Language of Illness / Honors290
Spring 2016 Silly Bus

Tuesdays & Thursdays
4-5:15pm in W04-0122

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Office hours after class and by appointment



“Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the **undiscovered countries** that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down in the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth-rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us - when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature.”

–Virginia Wolf, *On Being Ill*

“One of the most common platitudes we heard was that ‘words failed.’ But words were not failing Teri and me at all. It was not true that there was no way to describe our experience. Teri and I had plenty of language with which to talk to each other about the horror of what was happening, and talk we did. The words of Dr. Fangusaro and Dr. Lulla, always painfully pertinent, were not failing, either. If there was a communication problem, it was that there were **too many words**, and they were far too heavy and too specific to be inflicted on others.”



–Aleksander Hemon,
“The Aquarium” essay,
The New Yorker, 06/13/11

“Science and Charity”
Pablo Picasso, 1897

Course Description

From recent YA-sensation *The Fault in Our Stars* to the many hit TV medical dramas, there is something about illness that connects deeply and innately in our experience. Perhaps it is when we are most vulnerable that language becomes most vital. And at the same time: most difficult to express.

In this course, we ask: What is the language of illness? What “undiscovered countries” can we unfold from our own encounters with illness: personal, professional, or intellectual?

Through a close reading of illness-themed literature across genres (including poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose) and the hands-on practice of arts-in-healthcare creative exercises, we seek language that is meaningful and healing. We seek to sufficiently complicate words like “patient,” “sickness,” and “caretaker” in an effort to deepen empathy and explore beyond platitudes and realms where words supposedly fail.

This course draws inspiration from the growing arts in healthcare movement, as well as the field of creative writing, though experience in either is not required.

Class time will feature discussion of texts and creative exercise. Because of the emphasis on discussion, attendance and participation are mandatory. Weekly readings will bring forth regular journal assignments and fuel our discussions. All students will conceive of their own capstone project: either an original creative work (such as memoir, fiction, poetry, or a one-act play) inspired by the course themes, or an analysis of an original arts-in-healthcare exercise developed and carried out by the student.

This is a participative class for self-motivated students who want to take part in an active classroom.

Required Course Materials

- Notebook (paper or electronic). We will be doing in-class writing, and I encourage you to fill it outside of class, as well. This is a free, experimental space for you to explore your mind in words.
- *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green
- *W;t* by Margaret Edson
- *The View from Here: Vol. 2* by patients at Boston Children’s Hospital
- Weekly selections on e-reserves, Blackboard, and in-class handouts

I am still building a resource library and will continue throughout the semester. Suggestions are welcome!

Grade Distribution

Class participation (incl. attendance)	30%
Weekly assignments (incl. discussion posts)	30%
Midterm paper	15%
Capstone project	25%

Participation

Participation goes beyond reading assignments once and adding your two cents in class. Consider each reading carefully: ruminate and re-read. Participation includes listening to, encouraging, and collaborating with your peers. You should expect great things of each other and yourself; think how you can help each other to grow throughout the semester.

Also, we will deal with some emotionally charged material in this class, so a word on sensitivity: our classroom must be a safe space for all. The diversity of our perspectives and ideas should be a strength we can draw on. No one should fear their privacy compromised outside the classroom. So respect each other and yourself. We will balance our work with levity, too. If at any point you feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable with something in the classroom or in your writing, please do not hesitate to talk to me.

Weekly Assignments

Each week, you should email me one question or comment you have about that week's readings by Tuesday at noon. I'll print and distribute these in class to foster discussion.

Every two weeks or so, you will post a **journal entry** onto Blackboard. These should be a minimum of 600 words each. I'm interested in what you find significant about the readings. It could be in response to a character you find intriguing or a perplexing passage you wish to delve into. Perhaps the readings are spurring a response in you that you want to understand better; or, you notice some perspective or language that is missing and feel compelled to fill it in. Feel free to focus on what most urgently seizes your attention in the reading and make this the seed of your journal entry.

The journal tone can range from personal to analytical, reflective to evaluative. It is the depth and intensity of your engagement with the material that I will assess and respond to. Do not fall behind with these journals; they help you stay current with the readings and with your own thoughts, as well as provide fodder for your mid-term paper and capstone.

Midterm Paper

The midterm paper will be 6-8 pages (Times New Roman font, 12 point size, double spaced). You should cite specific examples from our course readings.

Topic options:

1. In her essay "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf calls for "a new language...more primitive, more sensual, more obscene" (7). How do our readings respond to this call for a language of illness? Based on your own writing and engagements with our texts, what constitutes the language or literature we need to reveal these "undiscovered countries" inside ourselves?
2. Reflect on your own creative writing in this class. How have the course readings informed and inspired your pen? Have you found language to be healing? If so, how? What specifically creates this effect? If not, what barriers do you come up against and how might you push past them? Show insights from close reading of our texts.
3. Trace the readings back to your professional goals or personal experience. What do these writers teach you about the abilities, limitations, and nuances of language? How can you apply these teachings to your own writing, career, or personal path?
4. Alternative topic proposals welcome with instructor approval.

Capstone Project

The Capstone Project is a work of original language that you will bring into being, inspired by your engagement with readings and peers in this course. You may choose:

A portfolio of creative writing (at least 6 pages of poetry or prose) plus a 2-3 page statement of what your work explores and how you created it.

An original arts-in-healthcare exercise that you create and implement (6-8 page paper incl. an abstract of your exercise and analysis of results).

All Capstone Projects will be compiled into a class book, which will endure as a resource and record long after the semester ends. More information on the Capstone Project, as well as a grading rubric, will be available at mid-semester.

During workshop week, students will have the opportunity to receive feedback on early drafts of their Capstone Projects. The last two weeks of the semester, students will get 10-15 minutes each to present their final work.

Students will not be graded on creative writing ability. So, write boldly. Play.

Anyone interested in publishing their work outside of class has many options, including:

- *Writ Large* published by the Honors College at UMB
- *The Watermark*, *Breakwater Review*, and *Write on the DOT* published at UMB (Write on the DOT also runs a live reading series in Dorchester (writeonthedot.blogspot.com))

Weekly Schedule

(Subject to Change)

Week One (Jan 26 & 28): Beginnings

“Why I Write” by Terry Tempest Williams; “Shitty First Drafts” by Anne Lamott; “Introduction to Poetry” by Billy Collins.

Week Two (Feb 2 & 4): Two Essays

“On Being Ill” by Virginia Woolf; “The Aquarium” by Aleksander Hemon

Week Three (Feb 9 and 11): Poetry I

Selections from *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg; “How Poetry can Lift Us from our Troubled Times” by Jennifer Imsande; “Between Walls” by William Carlos Williams; “Ode to the Hotel Near the Children’s Hospital” by Kevin Young; “A Story About the Body” by Robert Haas; “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye; “To One Shortly to Die” by Walt Whitman; “Offices” by Jill McDonough; “After an Illness, Walking the Dog,” “Sun and Moon,” “Christmas Away from Home,” and “Having it Out with Melancholy” by Jane Kenyon; “Her Long Illness” and “Without” by Donald Hall; “Telling Suffering: A Brief Interview with Donald Hall” from *The Hedgehog Review*.

First journal entries due Friday, February 12th

Week Four (Feb 16 & 18): Poetry II

Selection from *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* by Janet Burroway;
“Jundee Ameriki” by Brian Turner; “Strange Little Prophets” by Barbara Perez;
“Bipolar” by Cristina Garcia; “Fever 103,” “Tulips” by Sylvia Plath; “23 Jan” by
Anne Boyer; “The Nurse’s Pockets,” “What the Nurse Likes,” and “The Body
Flute” by Cortney Davis; “Sheets” by Fanny Howe; “Notes from Dialysis” by Hugo
Williams; “Chemo Side Effects: Memory” by Elise Partridge; “Doctors” by Anne
Sexton; “On Leaving the Body to Science” by Claudia Emerson.

Week Five (Feb 23 & 25): Short Fiction and Prose

“People Like That Are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk” by
Lorrie Moore; excerpt from *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride; “Spell
World Backward” by Bernard Cooper.

*Second journal entries due Friday, February 26th

Week Six (Mar 1 & 3): Drama and Ekphrastic Poetry

W;t by Margaret Edson (pgs 1-48)

Week Seven (Mar 8 & 10): Drama

W;t by Margaret Edson (pgs 48-85).

Midterm papers due in class on Thursday, March 10

Spring Break (Mar 15 & 17)