

The Language of Illness / Honors291-03
Fall 2018 Syllabus

Tuesdays & Thursdays
9:30-10:45am in W04-0122

Aaron Devine
aaron.devine@umb.edu
Office hours 11-noon and by appointment in CC-2100



“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 explore 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, art, music, 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'll do in-class writing; I encourage you to write outside class, too. This is a free, experimental space to explore your mind in words.
- *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (ISBN-13: 978-0141345659)
- *W;t* by Margaret Edson (ISBN-13: 978-0571198771)
- *Falling Ill: Last Poems* by C.K. Williams (ISBN-13: 978-0374152208)
- *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft - Fourth Edition* by Janet Burroway (ISBN-13: 978-0134053240)
- *The View from Here: Vol. 2* by patients at Boston Children's Hospital
- Weekly selections on e-reserves, Blackboard, and in-class handouts

Grading (These are approximate. Better to address grade concerns earlier than later.)

Class participation (including attendance*)	30%
Assignments (journals, workshop, craft talk)	30%
Midterm paper	15%
Capstone project	25%

*Note that more than 3 absences will affect your final grade.

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.

Journal Assignments

Every week, you will post a journal entry onto Blackboard alternating between creative and expository week to week.

Creative journals should be drafts of poems, stories, or other creative writing that you start during an in-class writing prompt. Students will not be graded on creative writing ability. So, write boldly. Play with language in ways that surprise you. There is no minimum word count.

Expository journals should be a minimum of 500 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 midterm paper and capstone.

Student Craft Talks

Later in the semester (November), each student will select one poem from C.K. Williams' collection *Falling Ill* and lead an in-class craft discussion. Students will talk about: 1. What they love, 2. How the poem is constructed, 3. What it adds to the language of illness. Each student will also suggest a writing prompt—related to the Williams poem or other text.

Midterm Paper

The midterm paper will be 6-8 pages (Times New Roman font, 12-point font, double spaced). Support your ideas with specific examples from at least 3 of our course readings (include a Works Cited page following MLA style). After I hand back your graded midterm, you may submit a revision (with the possibility of one full letter grade improvement) for up to two weeks.

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. The last two weeks of the semester, students will get 10-15 minutes each to present their final work. More information on the Capstone Project, as well as a grading rubric, are available on Blackboard.

Writers Workshops

During workshops, students will have the opportunity to receive feedback on creative writing that could become part of their Capstone Projects. The workshop focus is always on the writing not the writer. Workshops ask two simple questions: What do you love in the writing? What craft questions can we ask about the writing? It is important for our workshop to stick to these two questions and not drift into other analysis. Workshops give the writer an invaluable chance to hear from classmates what is working in their writing and what remains unclear to their readers. Each workshop should motivate writers that they’re doing good work and to keep going. As author Steve Almond wrote, “To look at the work of your peers, and learn how to explain with kindness and precision, the nature of their mistakes is, in fact, how you learn to diagnose your own work.”

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 (Facebook.com/WriteontheDOT))

Weekly Schedule
(Subject to Change)

THEME/READINGS FOR THIS WEEK	TUESDAY	THURSDAY	ASSIGNMENTS
Wk1: What is the language of illness? Readings: Natalie Goldberg, Billy Collins, Aleksander Hemon, Janet Burroway (Chptr 1: Invitation)	9.04 Introductions and review syllabus.	9.06 Begin “The Aquarium” by Hemon. Exercise in metaphor.	Choose the most interesting metaphor from Thursday’s exercise. Free write to extend and explore it for new language or ideas.
Wk 2: Locating personal and professional points of view on illness. Readings: W.H. Auden, Jennifer Imsande, Jane Kenyon, Anne Sexton, Barbara Perez, Fanny Howe, C.K. Stead, Fernando Pessoa, Virginia Woolf, and Janet Burroway (workshop, pgs 12-13; Chptr 2: Image).	9.11 Discuss Hemon and W.H. Auden. Practice praise. <u>Journal #1 due</u>	9.13 Discuss poems and points of view. Writers workshop Exercise against cliché.	Brainstorm a list of illness clichés. Translate them using “What I Really Mean Is...” (WIRMI)
Wk 3: Creative Writing & its Tools Readings: Anne Lamott, Janet Burroway (Chptr 3: Voice), Eimear McBride, Sylvia Plath, Kevin Young, Elise Partridge, Cortney Davis, Gwen Harwood.	9.18 Discuss Woolf. <u>Journal #2 due</u>	9.20 Discuss Woolf & poems. Exercise: Ekphrasis	Write an Ekphrastic poem. Find a speaker (human or inanimate) and give it a voice using tone and diction. What does it want to say? How does it say it? What goes unsaid?
Wk 4: Who is ill? Imagining complex characters. Readings: John Green,	9.25 Guest speaker: Ana Linares of the Creative Arts Program at Boston Children’s	9.27 Discuss <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> (chptrs 1-6) Writers workshop	Create a scene/short fiction that shows illness in a surprising context or place (not a hospital). Create a

Janet Burroway (Chptr 4: Character), <i>The View From Here: Volume 2</i> , Cortney Davis	Hospital <u>Journal #3 due</u>		tension between the character and the place. What truths are revealed?
Wk 5: Form and Discovery. Readings: Mark Doty, Walt Whitman, Donald Hall, Cristina Garcia, Claudia Emerson, Barbara Crooker, John Green, Tony Hoagland (pg 320 in Burroway)	10.02 Discuss Doty. <u>Journal #4 due</u>	10.04 Discuss <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> (chptrs 7-12)	Respond “in conversation” with a poem we’ve read. Write your poem in a form that mirrors—or diverges—from the original. Be intentional. What does the form you choose help you to communicate?
Wk 6: Narrative Journeys Readings: Janet Burroway (Chptrs 5 & 6: Story), Sylvia Plath	10.09 Guest Speaker: Lori Earl of This Star Won’t Go Out <u>Journal #5 due</u>	10.11 Conclude: <i>TFIOS</i> (chptrs 13-26) Writers workshop	Choose a subject relevant to our class and write a “You’re” riddle poem inspired by Sylvia Plath. Select your most original, image-rich descriptions.
Wk 7: On Lightness Readings: Katrina Vandenberg, Janet Burroway (Chptr 10: Poetry), Ross Gay, Stacie Cassarino, Leo Tolstoy	10.16 Discuss poetry and “The Death of Ivan Ilyitch” <u>Journal #6 due</u>	10.18 Discuss Vandenberg.	Innovate a creative work using an existing form (i.e. a pain scale, medical waiver, sympathy card, doctor’s note, medical chart, list of symptoms).
Wk 8: The Authority of Authorship Readings: Lorrie Moore, Ross Gay	10.23 Essay workshop <u>Journal #7 due</u>	10.25 Discuss Moore. <u>Midterm essay due</u>	Choose a moment after great heaviness. Write in any form you choose to bring light/lightness to it—the whole or one small part. Avoid cliché.
Wk 9: Returning to Character Readings: Janet	10.30 Discuss W;t (part 1) <u>Journal #8 due</u>	11.01 Discuss W;t (part 2) Writers workshop	Imagine a character with a difficult medical decision to make. Write a scene

Burroway (Chptr 11: Drama), Margaret Edson, John Donne			that shows—without telling—how complex the decision is.
Wk 10: Conversations in Craft Readings: C.K. Williams, Persona poetry, Atul Gawande, Robert Haas	<i>11.06</i> Student talks: C.K. Williams <u>Journal #9 due</u>	<i>11.08</i> Student talks: C.K. Williams	Write a persona poem from the point of view of someone you disagree with. Write until you can understand why they hold their position—even if you still disagree. Use language to uncover empathy.
Wk 11: Conversations in Craft Readings: Anis Mojgani, Janet Burroway (Chptr 7: Development and Revision)	<i>11.13</i> Student talks: C.K. Williams <u>Journal #10 due</u>	<i>11.15</i> Extended Writers workshop	Write a creative tribute: Whose tragedy are we missing? In what fog of information?
Wk 12: On Gratitude	<i>11.20</i> Film: “How to Break” by Aaron Jafferis	<i>No class ~ Thanksgiving Holiday</i>	Conduct a StoryCorps interview on the topic of illness. Upload with the keywords: <i>Honors291</i> and <i>languageofillness</i>
Wk 13: The Resonance of Endings	<i>11.27</i> Discuss: A craft look at endings.	<i>11.29</i> Discuss: StoryCorps Interviews <u>Capstone Portfolios due in class</u>	
Wk 14: Capstones	<i>12.04</i> Student Capstone Presentations	<i>12.06</i> Student Capstone Presentations	
Wk 15: Capstones	<i>12.11</i> Student Capstone Presentations	<i>12.13</i> Student Capstone Presentations Final Reflection	

Core readings and Fundamental Assumptions:

All Honors AR courses address the following fundamental assumptions of the field:

1. The artist's subjectivity affects the creative process
2. The creative process is shaped overtly and subliminally by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the artist works
3. The creative outcome is open to interpretation
4. The interpretive process is driven by features of the creative piece and conventions of the creative process for that specific art form
5. Artists both build on established conventions in their field and disrupt them
6. The creative process involves attention to aesthetic frameworks
7. The creative process involves revision

We will address these assumptions using the following core readings:

- Doty (Assumptions #1-7): Mark Doty. (2000) "Souls on Ice." Academy of American Poets/poets.org.
- Burroway (Assumption #1-7): Janet Burroway. (2014) *Imaginative Writing (4th Edition)*. Pearson.
- Lamott (Assumptions #1, 3, 5, 6, & 7): Anne Lamott. (1994) Excerpts from *Bird by Bird*. Knopf.
- Vandenberg (Assumptions #2, #3, 5, 6): Katrina Vandenberg (2013). "On Lightness" speech delivered at AWP conference 2013.