

Anatomy Lab: A Poetry Workshop

Instructor: Dan Featherston

Place: Poetry Center (phone: 520-626-3765)

Time: Saturdays, 21 May–25 June, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

Materials Fee: \$5

Required Text: Coursepack (available through instructor)

A post-graduate student equipped with honours and diplomas went to Agassiz* to receive the final and finishing touches. The great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.

Post-Graduate Student: 'That's only a sunfish.'

Agassiz: 'I know that. Write a description of it.'

After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the Ichthus Heliodiplodokus, or whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family Heliichtherinkus, etc., as found in textbooks of the subject.

Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish.

The student produced a four-page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish. At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it.

* **Louis Agassiz (1807-1873):** Swiss-born US paleontologist and geologist.

—Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

Course Description: In addition to being the science of animal and plant structure, the anatomy (Gr. *ana*—up, *temnein*—to cut) can be loosely defined as "any critical analysis of something." Open to both dispersal and gathering, analysis and creation, the flexible form of the anatomy has attracted philosophers, fiction writers, and poets alike. In this workshop, we will explore the literary anatomy and its related forms (e.g., amatory anatomy, catalog poem, list poem, blason, abecedarian) in weekly poetry-writing assignments. We will also read examples of poetry-, prose-, and mixed-genre anatomies and their variants (e.g., Homer, Song of Solomon, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Darwin's *Loves of the Plants*, Gass' *On Being Blue*; Native American chant-songs; poems by Whitman, Ponge, Rexroth, Stein, and others). We will divide class time between critical discussion of assigned readings and workshopping poems. Although we will be focusing on writing anatomies within a poetic form, anyone interested in the relationship between poetry and prose is welcome.

Coursework: We will divide class time between discussing coursepack poems and workshopping poems from group members. Coursework will involve coursepack readings, writing or revising one poem per week, and keeping an anatomy notebook (see below). I will hand out assignment sheets during meetings 1-4. Although everyone is encouraged to write poems based on these assignments, I am open to other proposals that relate to the theme of the course (e.g., ongoing anatomy projects, variations on assignments, revisions of earlier assignments). Although we will be focusing on literary anatomies, we will be reading a great deal of sacred and secular literature that openly engages physical realities that may be offensive to some people. If you have any difficulties with reading such material, please talk to me right away.

Anatomy notebook: The notebook is an excellent tool for writers, and I hope that everyone keeps a notebook as a kind of moveable laboratory, recording everything and anything: words, sounds, images, ideas, observations, lists, responses to writings, and so on. As a study in the discipline of in situ writing and an exploration into the dynamics of still life anatomies, I would like everyone to keep a separate anatomy notebook. Within the first week of class, find one organic object (leaf, flower, fruit, etc.). Keep this object where it won't be disturbed. Try to write each day in your anatomy notebook, composing upon the object's decomposition. Use all of your senses. Note how the object changes; note how you change in relation to the object's changing composition. Feel free to also photograph, sketch, or somehow visually record the object as it moves through time. For the last class meeting, I would like everyone to bring in their anatomy notebook to share with other members of the class.

Additional Resources: I invite everyone to copy and share with the class examples of favorite anatomies. For additional resources on poetic forms, including anatomies, see Ron Padgett, *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*; Larry Fagin, *The List Poem: A Guide to Teaching & Writing Catalog Verse*; Bernadette Mayer, Experiments List (online via SUNY-Buffalo Poetics).

If you are squeamish

Don't prod the
beach rubble

–Sappho, fragment 84 (from *Sappho: A New Translation*, Mary Barnard)

Anatomy Lab Syllabus

Please make sure to bring your coursepack to each class meeting.

C = Coursepack

21 May: Introductions

Introductions; discussion of anatomies; visual anatomy: Peter Greenaway, *26 Bathrooms*.

Handouts: Gass (from *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry*); Darwin (from *Loves of the Plants*); Stein (from *Tender Buttons*); Mullen, (from *Trimmings*); Featherston, "Eponymous Sonnets"; **Assignment Sheet 1: Language Anatomy.**

28 May: Language Anatomy

In-class discussion: Language Anatomies.

Read: 21 May handouts.

Handouts: coursepack; **Assignment Sheet 2: Body/Amatory Anatomy.**

Workshop: Language anatomies.

Bring: multiple copies of your poem for class members.
(Robert Creeley Memorial at Poetry Center, 4-6 p.m.)

4 June: Body Anatomy (Amatory)

In-class discussion: Body/Amatory Anatomies.

Read: C Introduction; Song of Solomon; Burton (from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*); from *The Perfumed Garden of the Shaykh Nefzawi*; Rexroth, "A Dialogue of Watching" (from *Selected Poems*).

Handout: Assignment Sheet 3: List/Catalog Anatomy.

Workshop: Body/amatory anatomies

Bring: multiple copies of your poem for class members.

11 June: List Anatomy (Catalog)

In-class discussion: List/Catalog Anatomies.

Read: C Shonagon (from *The Pillow Book*); "The Calendars" (from *Shaking the Pumpkin*); Kelly, "In the Light" (From *A Strange Market*); Featherston, "Pink" (from *Anatomies*).

Handouts: Assignment Sheet 4: In Situ Anatomy; list/catalog poems (McCrystal, Cooper).

Workshop: List/catalog anatomies

Bring: multiple copies of your poem for class members.

18 June: In Situ Anatomy

In-class discussion: In Situ Anatomies.

Read: C Ponge (from *Things*, Trans. Cid Corman).

Workshop: In situ anatomies.

Bring: multiple copies of your poem for class members.

25 June: Anatomy Notebook

In-class discussion: Anatomy notebooks; other anatomies.

Workshop: Anatomy notebooks

Bring: multiple copies of a favorite anatomy; anatomy notebook.