The Art of the Personal Essay
Proposed Course for Winter Session 2018
Elizabeth Bobrick

Overview
The personal essay has a long and rich history, and is still a vibrant, flourishing, and culturally pertinent genre. Although the essay defies a fixed definition, its essence is creative inquiry, an exploration of the significance of ordinary and extraordinary events, from James Baldwin’s account of his father’s death during the Harlem riot of 1943, to Maggie Nelson’s reflections on the pain of giving birth.

By studying narrative techniques and strategies, we become more sophisticated readers and writers. Our readings will be grouped loosely by themes that form the basis of many essays: how remembered and closely observed objects and places evoke memories and speculation, and how familial, ethnic, and cultural dynamics shape personal and political transformation. Each will be considered within historical and cultural contexts.

Our reading list includes works by Michel Montaigne, John McFee, Roxane Gay, Jo Ann Beard, Jhumpa Lahiri, Richard Rodriguez, Aleksander Hemon, James Baldwin, Maggie Nelson, and many others, as well as essays by essayists on the craft of writing within this malleable form.

In class discussion, we will focus on technique -- structure, voice, clarity, and the use of descriptive detail – and how they create meaning. You will write three essays, making use of techniques studied in class, and you will revise these essays after peer review and my comments. Ideally, you will see how the choices you make as a writer, particularly in the process of revision, lead you to new ideas and encourage you to question your own and others’ assumptions.

Please note that the class is a seminar, i.e., more time will be devoted to discussion of assigned readings than to peer critique (aka ‘workshop’).

Course goals
Your grade will depend on your participation in class discussion and on your written work. You should demonstrate growth and competency in the following areas:

(1) Your ability to analyze and use a variety of structures and techniques
(2) Your practice of revision
(3) Your response to your peers’ writing with constructive, substantive comments
(4) Your close reading of the texts as demonstrated in class discussion

Grading
Letter grades for writing classes are subjective. The University has entrusted me to use my judgment in assigning them. I expect everyone to be a more skilled reader and writer by the end of the course than they were at the beginning.

Class participation (your contributions to discussion of our assigned readings and writing, in-class and online) will constitute 50% of your final grade.

Required writing (see below) will constitute 50% of your final grade.

You’ll write three essays, each 4-5 pages in length. I’ll give you a choice of prompts related to that week’s reading by topic and/or structure for the first two essays. You’ll post your draft online, along with a statement of what you hoped to get across to your readers, what choices you made as a result, and what you are finding challenging. After you’ve shared your draft, others will be expected to post their comments on a designated forum. We’ll discuss your drafts in class for as long as time allows. (This is called ‘peer review’ on the calendar of daily assignments, below.) I’ll respond to your drafts in writing and in conversation during my office hours (TBA).

**Daily Assignments**
Class meets Jan. 8 – 12 and 15-19, 10am – 12pm, 2pm – 4pm. Because of the nature of the course, you cannot miss even one class unless you are unable to attend due to debilitating illness or serious emergency. In such cases, it’s your responsibility to inform me as well as your class dean that you’ll be out, and you will be required to make up any missed work.

[*A note to those reviewing this proposal: The time set aside for peer review below may change, depending on the number of students in the class.]*

Your packet of course readings is available at low cost at the Cardinal Store in Usdan. Bring the packet to every class.

**Week 1**
Monday, Jan. 9 [essays with guidelines for reading distributed prior to Class 1]
Hampl, Patricia: “The Dark Art of Description”
Accawi, Anwar: “The Telephone”
Sanders, Scott Russell: “The Inheritance of Tools”
White, E.B., “Moon Landing”

Tuesday, Jan. 10
Stuckey-French, Ned, “Our Queer Little Hybrid Thing”
Mín, Anchee, “Footprints on the Flag”
Purpura, Lia, “On Miniatures”
Kostova, Elizabeth, “No Ideas But in Things”

Wednesday, Jan. 11
Root, Robert: “Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment”
Rodriguez, R. “Proofs”
Alexie, Sherman, “Indian Education”

Thursday, Jan. 12
O’Brien, Tim, “The Vietnam in Me”
Nelson, Maggie, “In the Pain Cave”
McPhee, John, “The Search for Marvin Gardens”

**Before 8 pm, Jan. 12**, you will post your essay in progress on Moodle. After you’ve posted yours, begin reading those posted by your classmates. This is required. No exceptions. **No late postings.** I need time to read them before class.

Friday, Jan. 13
Lahiri, Jhumpa, “Trading Stories”
Dubus, Andre, “A Hemingway Story” and Hemingway’s “In Another Country”

Peer review of essays-in-progress

**Week 2**

Monday, Jan. 16  **Revised essay #1 due**
Van Meter, Ryan, “If You Knew Then What I Know Now”
McKeithen, Madge, “What Really Happened”
Kincaid, Jamaica, “A Small Place”
Bradley, James, “Who Is the You?”

Tuesday, Jan. 17
Gay, Roxane, excerpts from *Bad Feminist*
Gay, Roxane, “Who Gets to Be Angry?”
Als, Hilton, “Notes on My Mother”

Wednesday, Jan. 18
Baldwin, James: “Notes of a Native Son.”
Baldwin, James: “Letter from a Region in My Mind”

Thursday, Jan. 19
Beard, Jo Ann, “The Fourth State of Matter”
Walker, Karen, “Of the 62 Interesting Facts About Wolves”
Post your essay-in-progress #2 before 8 pm, Friday, Jan. 20

Friday, Jan. 20
Doyle, Brian, “Joyas Voladoras”
Montaigne, Michel, selected essays
White, E.B., “The Ring of Time”
Peer review of essays in progress
(Friday, Jan 20, cont’d)
Class discussion of essay #3: prompts and guidelines.

Jan. 22: Revised essay #2 due

Jan. 24: Essay #3 due. This essay can’t be revised for credit.