Course Description: This course will explore a strain of storytelling that might seem, at first glance, a little spindly. The texts under examination will feature extreme compression, elliptical structures, and conspicuous narrative absences, storytelling modes that stand in direct opposition to the larger scope, causal sequencing, and exposition-heavy style often found in conventional novels and short stories. In the class readings and their own original work, students will investigate fiction that proposes new formal approaches, incorporates strategies from poetry and other genres, and "minimizes" the traditional narrative arc by slicing it up in new ways. Ultimately, the class will be a kind of creative laboratory where students can craft experimental narrative forms, discovering their own “thin stories” and the rich, tricky possibilities therein.

Goals: In this class students will study what effects a piece of “thin” literature (as defined above) achieves, and how the author achieves those effects. Reading “like a writer” is the best way to grasp new strategies and options, and applying this understanding to one’s own writing is the best way to expand and invigorate one’s creativity. To this end, students will be expected to read carefully and critically, to participate actively and regularly in discussion, and to synthesize course concepts into their own creative writing. Students will be expected to identify and discuss formal and technical aspects such as tone, style, point of view, structure, dialogue, scene, summary, etc., and investigate the ways in which our class readings diverge from common assumptions about how such craft elements should operate. Exercises and assignments will provide a platform for students to demonstrate their understanding of these distinctions, and to record their own imaginative explorations. Our formal workshop will provide a forum in which students can give and receive constructive feedback on their work. These aspects of the class will encourage students to challenge themselves intellectually—expanding their specific craft-related understanding—and creatively—pushing themselves to experiment and transform their own writing in innovative ways.

Required texts:

- Raymond Carver. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Vintage.
- Denis Johnson. *Jesus’ Son*. Picador.


Course Reader (available at Unique Copy Center. 252 Greene St. between Waverly Place and 8th Street).

**Notebook** You’ll also need a notebook for this class, preferably one with a 3-ring binding so you can take pages in and out. This will be the repository for exercises, assignments, and your notes on class discussion and workshops.

**Requirements**

**Attendance:** Since this is an interactive class that relies on student participation, regular attendance is mandatory. If you miss a class, you remain responsible for all reading and writing assignments, and if you have work scheduled for submission, it’s still your duty to get it to me and your colleagues. If you miss more than three classes, you will not pass the course. If you are unable to fulfill your responsibilities due to a personal or family emergency, please contact me at your earliest convenience so we can accommodate everyone’s needs. Ditto religious observances.

  Lateness is strongly discouraged. It’s disruptive to the class, and not beneficial to the student. Three late marks will be counted as an absence. Naturally, students must be present mentally as well as physically. Students who have their heads on the desk, or zone out completely during class will be marked as absent.

**Shorter Writing Exercises:** Every class will include writing exercises, both in-class and take-home. You should take these seriously, but also use them as an opportunity to stretch out and be inventive. Some of your craziest or most imaginative exercises may someday morph into your most profound finished work. You will be called on regularly to share your work with the class, and you’ll be expected to listen and respond to the work of your fellow writers in the spirit of generosity, enjoyment, and constructive critique.

**Longer Works:** Three times during the semester you will be asked to submit completed drafts of “thin” works for critique. These longer submissions should be deeper and more seriously considered than an exercise, even if the premise is comic, ribald, or fantastic, and your piece must be—to the best of your abilities—complete. I advise you to begin work on these drafts well before the due date. Cobbling together a draft the night before it’s due is always a bad idea. The final assignment will be critiqued in a workshop environment. Revisions of these drafts, based on the feedback you receive, will be due in your portfolio at the end of the semester. You’ll receive more specific requirements and guidelines, both for the piece itself and for workshop protocol, later in the semester.

**Student Presentations:** Students will frequently be asked to give relatively informal presentations about the reading assignments, either individually or in groups. These presentations will give students the opportunity to bring the conceptual frameworks of our discussions to bear on the texts under examination, identify the narrative strategies in these works, and present these findings to the class in the interest of generating further discussion and analysis. While these presentations need not be practiced and polished, they should represent a fair amount of preparation, organization, and critical intelligence.
Final Portfolio: At the end of the semester you’ll be required to turn in your notebook, which should contain all of the creative writing assignments from the course, discussion and workshop notes, any and all drafts of the longer work, and revised, final drafts of those works.

Grades

Grades will be based on the following: attendance, participation, the level of intelligence and sophistication in responses to the required reading, quality of writing and effort to incorporate course concepts, and effort and success in revision. Regular participation and a completed portfolio are required to receive even a passing grade in the course. An A represents truly excellent work, a B commendably good work; a C adequate work; and a D poor work.

Exercises are graded √ +, √ or √ -: consider these marks a general estimation of how the piece stacked up within the class and not a reflection of your overall worth. Unsatisfactory exercises may be rewritten if the author chooses, but if you do, please include both the original and the rewrite when turning a second version in. These exercises may receive some brief commentary from me. Your longer stories will receive more extensive feedback. If at any point in the semester you are unclear about the course requirements, or have a question about your standing in the class or your grade, please don’t hesitate to ask.

Classroom Decorum

I expect you to be on time to class and to pay attention during our sessions. During class discussions, please give your colleagues the courtesy of your attention, and the respect they deserve when you respond to their writing. It is possible to be constructive and kind simultaneously. If we’re writing in-class, please grant your colleagues the courtesy of a quiet room. If you need to leave the classroom for personal reasons, you may do so, but keep these interruptions minimal. Do not step out of the room to make phone calls or conduct personal business. Each class session will include a short break midway through.

Though I realize we’re living in the digital age, laptops, iPads, Smartphones, and other digital devices are not allowed during our class sessions. They can be a great boon to study and to creative activity, but they can also prove very distracting in the classroom. Besides, studies have shown that more of the brain is activated when writers write by hand. Without exception, cell phones should be shut off and put away.

Office Hours

I will be in my office 1-3 p.m. on class days. If these times are impossible for you, let me know, and we'll work something out. I do my best to be available to students, and I encourage you to schedule private conferences as needed. I'm happy to discuss your work, the mystery of writing in general, the realm of literature, and other related matters. If you have questions about the progress of your writing or your status in the class, you may speak with me at any time.

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity, which includes properly documenting and citing all quoted and paraphrased material. Plagiarism of any kind is forbidden. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction in accordance with the Student Discipline Rules of the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Please consult this webpage for further information: www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html.
Schedule


2/4: Raymond Carver’s *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Course reader: Calvino’s “Lightness” and “Quickness” from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*; Kafka’s “The Bucket Rider,” Hemingway’s “Mr. and Mrs. Eliot.” Discussion. Writing.


2/18: Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son.* **Writing assignment #1 due.**

2/25: **Workshop.**


3/18: Spring break.

3/25: Lydia Davis’s *Varieties of Disturbance.* Course reader: Sontag’s “Proposed Notes for a Trip to China” and Raffel’s “Up Old Goat Road.” Discussion. Writing. **Writing assignment #2 due.**

3/25: **Workshop.**

4/1: Course reader: Brainard’s “I Remember,” Hass’s “A Story About the Body,” Winch’s “Shoot the Horse,” selected Edson poems, selections from Simic’s *The World Doesn’t End.*


4/29: Final course concerns and wrap-up. **Writing assignment #3 due for workshop (with copies for everyone).**


**Final Portfolios due Monday 5/12.**