



**THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP**

presents

**AN AMERICAN INDY ALL-STARS EDITION**

of

**BEAT THE DUST**

SEPTEMBER 2011

**Introduction by Jarred McGinnis**



Jarred McGinnis's random playlist:

Dixie's Land - The Mavericks

How 'Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm? - Andrew Bird

Sunshine on Leith - The Proclaimers

Victoria - The Kinks

Body Of An American - Pogues

The Special Relationship, our monthly literary variety night based in London, was named partly because it was two Americans and two Englishmen who started the event.

The name also describes the nature of the evening. No one in this day and age only reads or only listens to music or only watches films. Why should literary nights pretend there isn't incredible writing and story-telling from people who are not bound by the constraints of prose fiction? Each month we invite film makers, illustrators, playwrights, comedians, poets and prose writers who work across mediums and whose work profits from that cross-fertilisation. We make sure they are good. We make sure they aren't boring. It seems to be working so far. This year we've moved to a bigger venue and the crowds are steadily getting bigger. In no time at all, we'll be snorting coke off a stripper's tits and becoming obnoxious sell-outs. We can't wait.

This special issue of Beat the Dust was motivated by just how surprisingly little interaction there is amongst the indie-lit scenes of UK and the USA, despite the great bridge of the internet. We've asked a handful of people (published by publishers we love) whose work we admire, to submit something. There are a dozen more names that instantly came to mind, but for this issue we've narrowed it down to just eight writers.

I met **Ryan Van Winkle** in Edinburgh at the Forest Café . He's also a long time expat. Ryan's poetry is full of perfect lines describing love, sex and nostalgia. He's performed for the Special Relationship twice, including the inaugural show.

**Roxane Gay** is a busy woman. She's constantly popping up on the indie lit radar. She wears many hats (editor, professor, essay and fiction writer) and I suspect at least one nom de plume. She's got a realist style that makes you squirm whilst at the same time nodding, 'so true, so horribly true.'

**Merle Drown** made me realised what an ignorant shit I was. I thought Southern Gothic only happened below the rust belt. Merle's writing is up there with the best of Thomas Wolfe and Faulkner.

**Kim Parko** is a perfect example of what we look for at The Special Relationship. Her style blurs the distinctions between prose and poetry and utilises other media and genres to say what she wants to say.

**Joshua Mohr** is published by Two Dollar Radio, one of the best examples of just how good an indie publisher can be. When I read his first novel, I thought these are the stories I want to know and the characters I want to hear about.

**Lindsay Hunter** shows us the horror, the filth and the beauty of being human are never far from each other. I've had a writer crush on her ever since stumbling upon her fiction in my internet wanderings.

**A D Jameson** blogs actively at Big Other. The difference with A D's posts is he backs up his opinion with facts and references. His essays on literature, film and art always make me reconsider my many uninformed biases.

**Matthew Salesses** has a novella coming from the newly created Nouvella Books. He's published all over the place - Glimmer Train, Witness, American Short Fiction, The Literary Review - and with good reason.

## **Ryan Van Winkle**



Ryan Van Winkle's random playlist:

Religious Songs - Withered Hand  
Atlantic City - Bruce Springsteen  
Once I Was A lady - Lucky Fonz III  
In Any Case - Hailey Beavis  
Come Back To Edinburgh - Billy Liar

## **History Of A Mouth**

Her mouth was a universe  
of polaroids, her teeth lines

I wanted to steal and there were nights  
she called my mouth a boulder and said

she felt like Jesus. But first,  
I'd called her legs boulders

and I have opened many things,  
have struggled from toothless caves

then stepped back in  
to my father's light.

I have opened Christmas presents  
and phone lines and all the letters

I've ever been sent. This is getting off topic  
but I like to change topics, like new weather  
when the old weather gets predictable and  
every rose has a silver lining, every Jew  
will have his day and now I want

to describe how her mouth became new  
when we kissed; less a device than an instrument,

less a story than a history – the way Rome was built  
in there, the way cliché bumped into her cheeks and split

at her molars then resumed at the tongue, and I want to say  
that to kiss her is to own her,

that her taste of damp lawn  
is the taste of some secret I buried

in the back yard so my brothers could not  
find it. And I know there are animals with wings

which are not birds. I mourn for them.  
They should be called birds

though they are dinosaurs,  
flies, mosquitoes, moths. Moths drawn

so strangely to any kind of light  
and I want to believe

I am some kind of light  
and the fabric of her dress

was a wing I was gentle with, careful  
as a boy not to pull too hard. I wanted to study

this new animal and I wonder if moths, like men, are drawn  
to the light of distant and already dead stars, if any dream

of getting there just to feel that warmth  
on their milk wings. Do moths have private constellations

like we had when we were bright  
I named a pattern Clara

and you named one Casio-Bill. And I used to like

to cry every morning and there was a time

I could cry every morning and it seems like many stars passed  
before this ended and there were times I liked crying so much

I made a movie in my bed. A slow movie,  
like those of flower buds in bloom, but  
of me crying and sleeping and crying and  
there was another time I was crying and looked  
almost by accident into the world of vermin –

to the raccoon, the wharf-rat, the skunk  
grass and grapes and there was a time

before all these things  
when my bed felt like a mouth,

a young mouth, where I was the tooth and was caught  
by the root and had to wiggle – learn how to pull myself free.

## **Untitled**

*"I think the sea is a useless teacher" - Marie Howe, From Nowhere*

How I looked

to your eyes like they

were nothing but waves

and all I learned from the sea

is that it took the sand and never

spoke what it wanted and when we needed

cool it was cool and when we needed hot it was only

a radio signal from over the sound, coming in weak from Long

Island and when you needed hot you looked into my eyes and said Love,

your name is darkness and I said that is not my name, that is the name of

my teacher, the sea, or a fisherman wishing into waves all night with his wife

keeping the light on then off and all he or I ever got from the sea was a vocabulary

that the newspapers say grows less and less every day

## Roxane Gay



Roxane Gay's random playlist:

I Can't Make You Love Me - Bonnie Raitt  
Wherever, Whenever, Whatever - Maxwell  
Fastlove - George Michael  
Cold - Annie Lennox  
Baissez-bas - Tabou Combo

### **Come Find Get Save Me** - novel extract

I had been alone with Lorraine and Glen for what seemed like an eternity even though it had only been nine days, fewer days than I was held captive. In the after, days were not the same. They were long and indistinguishable and uncomfortable. I wanted to see other faces. I was tired of the stale smell of Lorraine's cigarettes and Glen's heavy breathing and the stench of manure and the rooster reminding me, each morning, how little I had slept. Talking was too difficult, too exhausting. I had taken to writing notes when asked questions or when I had a question. Lorraine said she was glad I had worked something out because she wasn't a mind reader. They kept me busy with chores around the farm—repairing fences, baking pies, building a new chicken coop, even planting seeds in Lorraine's garden. Most nights, there was dirt beneath my fingernails. My body still hurt, constantly, but it was a relief to have something to do, to be given clear, manageable tasks, and to otherwise be left alone.

Before I went out, I called my husband Michael. When he answered, I heard our son Christophe crying in the background. Michael sounded tired, irritable. He started talking about his day and then he stopped. He said, "You know what, I just don't have it in me today, Miri. Your sister just left. Our son is teething. He needs me. We need you. There's not much else that matters, is there?" I heard Christophe wail even louder. I could imagine his face, bright red, his eyes angry with tears. My breasts ached. I wanted to beg Michael to talk to me. I wanted to tell him that his voice was the only thing holding me together but the words could not come out. He sighed heavily. "I don't know what to do." He hung up.

I listened to the dial tone until the busy signal began to repeat and then I too hung up. I held the phone, wondered how I could fold the world in such a way as to erase everything terrible between us, the time, the distance, the damage. Then I got angry, so angry I sped off the farm and onto the country highway. I didn't slow down for the winding curves in the road.

When I walked into the bar, a Brooks and Dunn song was blaring from two speakers in the corner of a small dance floor. Several men and women, mostly my age or younger, some a little older, were hunched over the bar drinking light, foamy beer in glasses covered with beer sweat. I shoved my hands into my pockets and ignored the stares and took a seat at the bar. The bartender set down the lemon he was cutting and looked at me hard. "I know who you are," he said. "You're married to the Jameson boy; you're the one who got taken in that one country. I heard about it on CNN." I set my hands on the bar, looked down. He gave me a slight nod. "I was in the army," he said. I didn't understand the connection but I knew he meant well. I took a thin square of a bar napkin and wrote gin and tonic in big block letters with a black marker resting nearby. I pushed the napkin toward the bartender. He smiled and poured me a tall, stiff drink. Every once in a while, he would come and talk to me, mostly about his time in the military, his girlfriend Tracy, their three kids, how he wasn't sure he was ready to settle down even though he was plenty settled.

A tall blond man slid into the bar stool next to me. He was not handsome. He was not quite ugly. He had a choppy haircut and his hair hung shaggily over his ears, with a blunt shape along his forehead. His jeans were dirty and he wore a t-shirt with a hole in the left armpit. He offered to buy me a drink and I let him.

"You don't talk much," he said.

I shook my head.

"Fine by me. There's nothing more annoying than a woman who talks a lot but ain't got nothing to say."

He said his name was Shannon, said he hated having a woman's name, insisted he was all man, offered to show me just how. I took a tiny red sword from his drink and stabbed it into the palm of my hand and then the palm of his hand. "I like them feisty," he said. I stabbed him once more with my tiny red sword.

His knuckles were torn and scabbed over. He smelled raw. He inched closer and closer to me and talked and talked and didn't seem to care I only nodded. He said he worked for a meatpacking plant in the slaughterhouse. He said I was Prime Grade. I was meat, lean meat, at that point, but meat nonetheless. He pulled me on the dance floor. I could barely stand. The bar was terribly hot, the air thick, the walls pressing in on me. We started

moving, our bodies always touching. He hooked his fingers into my belt loops, pulling me more tightly against him. My skin felt like it was rolling in waves trying to separate itself from the fat, bone, muscle beneath. I slid my hands around his waist, swiveling my hips. He said, "Damn, you're sexy." I felt heavy and loose and the leash seemed almost invisible. I threw my head back, shaking my hair out. I wanted nothing to do with this man. I wanted everything to do with this man. I thought about Michael hanging up on me. I grinded myself against Shannon even harder, made myself sicker. I burned.

After several songs we returned to the bar. He bought me another drink. He leaned into me, resting his hand on my thigh, digging his fingers into my thigh. His breath was hot and wet and horrible against my neck. He laughed coldly, said, "We should take this outside."

Sometimes, when a broken bone isn't healing properly, the doctor will re-break the bone. I would let this man with a woman's name break me again so I might be properly healed. I stood carefully and began walking toward the back door, focusing on placing one foot in front of the other. I paused, turned, looked at Shannon, nodded toward the door. By the time we made it outside, I was leaning against him.

Shannon stood in front of me. He was much, much taller but fleshy. His girth repulsed me. I was meat. I did not want this but I did not leave. I waited, hoping he would break my bones, needing him to break my bones even though they were already broken. He leaned down until his lips were practically touching mine. I turned my head slightly. He could not have my mouth. He tapped my chin with a calloused finger. "I bet you like it real rough." I tried to relax, to make it easier for him to break me. I wondered how his fist might fit against my chin or in my gut or how his hands might span the circumference of my neck. I wanted to say to him, "Put me in the ground. I am already dead."

I waited. I waited for Shannon to do what needed to be done. He did not take long.

He grabbed me by my shoulders, digging his fingers into me so hard, I groaned. I closed my eyes. I knew, by then, how to surrender, how to surrender to being broken. He pushed me against the brick wall, tried to push me into the wall. The bruises on my back brightened. He kicked my legs apart and grabbed me by my hair, yanking my head back. He shoved a hand into my pants. He stared at me. I did not look away. I felt nothing as he jammed two fingers inside of me. I was dry, very tender. He said, "Yeah, baby." I was meat. He licked my cheek. I swallowed the sharp acid that rose. He slid a third finger inside me. I closed my eyes even tighter. I felt nothing but the pain was not bearable. He started moving his fingers in and out of me. I could feel him hard against my thigh. "You are so hot," he said. He released his grip on my hair and started to tug my jeans lower. I hoped the cover of night would hide the marks I did not care to explain. He thrust his fingers inside me especially hard. The pain was perfect and necessary. "You know," he grunted. "You could help me out." I shrugged. His features changed, rearranged themselves into something more dangerous. He wrapped a hand around my throat, answered one of my questions. I did not gasp. He said, "You're going to give me what I'm due," as if we were negotiating, as if I were putting up a fight, one he couldn't quite make sense of.

The first night they came for me, after the first phone call where I told my father and husband lies about my safety, and they told me lies about my safety, when I lost count of how many men used me, I wrapped myself around the pain then too. I knew I had no choice. I fought real hard, until I was out of fight. I have a lot of fight.

My bare thighs were cold. I could feel goose bumps spreading across my skin. Shannon slammed me against the wall again. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He shook his head and started unbuckling his pants. "Fucking women." A large rodeo buckle held his belt together but he did not give me the impression of a man who had ever put himself in a circumstance where he might be broken. He reached into his pocket for a condom, tore it open with his teeth. I watched us, me against the wall, the mark of his fingers around my throat, standing there, spread open, waiting for him to take me. It was such a relief for something to finally make sense. He pulled my hand to his cock. "You feel that?" I swallowed as I felt the heat and length of him in my hand. He wrapped my fingers around him, covered my fingers with his. I squeezed lightly. I refused to cry.

I prayed for mercy. I opened my hand, stretching my fingers. I did not want to touch him.

That first night the men came for me, after the first phone call where I told my father and husband lies about my safety, and they told me lies about my safety, when I lost count of how many men used me, I prayed because I had faith, because I needed faith. I prayed for mercy and I prayed for more, for a breath of cool, dry air. I prayed to forget. There was no salvation.

I planted a hand against Shannon's chest, tried to pull my jeans up with my other hand. "No," I said. My voice was hoarse. I hardly recognized the sound of my voice.

Shannon laughed. "Playing hard to get?"

He pushed my jeans back down, held me against the wall with his arm to my throat. I started clawing at his chest. I wanted to scream but my voice was still too new. "No," I said.

"What kind of game are you playing? I don't take no for an answer."

"No."

Suddenly the back door swung open again. There was a rush of cold air. When I opened my eyes, the bartender was holding Shannon by the collar of his shirt.

"The lady said no, so you best leave her be."

"She's a fucking cock tease," Shannon said, pulling his jeans up. He left the condom on. He spit on the pavement to his right, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and pointed a finger in my direction.

"No, sir," the bartender said. "Go on home. This was a misunderstanding."

I tried to pull myself together, my fingers stiff as I fumbled with the buttons of my jeans. I fell to my knees and then I fell further still, resting my forehead against my hands.

The bartender called my father-in-law who also came for me. I was so gin-soaked I could barely move. "You poor girl," Glen said softly. "No," I whispered. "Don't hurt me." My mantra returned. My father-in-law carried me to his truck and I let him, wrapping my arm around his neck, resting my head against his chest, thick and strong like his son's. He too was familiar. "No one is going to hurt you, girl," he said.

Back at the farmhouse, Glen carried me up to Michael's bedroom, pulled my shoes off, covered me with a blanket. He said, "You are very loved." I heard him. I slept, hard.

In the morning I wrote another note: "Tell Michael, please come. Please come get me."

## Merle Drown



Merle Drown's random playlist:

Concierto de Aranjuez  
Whispering Bells - The Del-Vikings  
Gimme A Little Sign - Brenton Wood  
The Train Kept A Rollin' - Johnny Burnette  
Israelites - Desmond Dekker

## The Mayor's Wife

She came into the police station, one o'clock in the morning, the mayor's wife, dressed like a chippy.

"I want you to find me a room," she says.

Still living at home, I knew nothing about renting rooms or where to look when talking to a half-dressed woman old enough to be my mother. It was one of those May nights where after the sun goes down, clouds hold in the warmth and everything feels damp, earthy and smells of growing.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, saying "yes" only because I was afraid to say no. "What's the matter, ma'am?"

"The matter is I need a room, to stay in—why are you asking me? You know what a room is for. Now get me a room!"

"Please calm down," I said, not having the courage even to be offended. "Do you want me to call your husband?"

She shrieked like an angry rabbit. As I started around the desk, she grabbed our ink bottle and hurled it. Stupidly, I turned to watch the black spot stretch down the plaster.

She beat her fists on my back. "Oh, you men! You stupid, stupid, men!"

The sergeant came out with an old horse blanket, and we chased her all the way to River Street before we could wrap her in that sweat-stunk blanket. I hated doing it. I argued not

to take her home, but the sergeant would have none of it. Two o'clock in the morning his honor opened the front door. I heard him lock it just before her screaming began.

A year later he sent the sergeant and another cop to Florida to bring her back.

"Not on your life would we do any of that today," this beat young cop says after I tell him the story. I don't know him, don't know his father or his uncle. City of twenty-five thousand, you knew everyone on the force. This kid, he knows me. "A legend," he says.

I listen carefully, but I don't hear a snicker. At eighty-five, my hearing's a bit of guesswork. I say, "A legend?" and laugh.

"Just between you and me," he says, "take an officer with judgment, like yourself, sir, why the old ways may have worked better. Only now you can't choose, not if you want to stay on the force and not have your picture resting on half the citizens' cereal bowls."

Sixty years ago you got on the force, and there you stayed, doing your job, getting respect, collecting a few bottles of whatnot come Christmas, and hearing only the occasional lip from young ruffians, who thought breaking a couple of windows made them bigger in the pants.

I keep the rest of the story to myself, how two years after Florida, the mayor's wife called me, midnight, and her husband dead on their parlor carpet. She helped me tumble him down the cellar stairs. Then I poured booze on him and reported the tragic accident.

### **Ironing The Boys' Shirts**

In 1930 my mother came down with the TB. Five of us kids, me, the first girl, only twelve, in the middle. They wanted to pull us out of the house, they were so scared of the TB, but instead they sent my mother to relatives out in the country. My father spent nothing on her care, nothing. He still white-shirted himself after work at Chemical. He was a vain man.

They tested all of us for the TB. Lucky, no one had it, but my mother had no luck. When she was dying, they brought her back to our house and put her in the big bedroom downstairs. For two days a neighbor had us kids sitting against that bedroom wall saying the Angelus, and when we finished, our mother was dead.

My father laid her out in the living room right under the piano window and turned the heat off to keep the house cold. Then afterwards, we'd come from school to a cold house. He didn't allow us to turn on the heat until he got off work.

In June my teacher asked me why I was tired, and I told her my mother had died. "Who's ironing the boys' shirts?" she asked, meaning my two older brothers. "I am," I said. "Your father should get some help in that house."

But, of course, he wouldn't. All summer my oldest brother was boss of us kids. Too strict, of course, but what could he do? Nobody ever taught him how. In September we didn't go back to school, except for my little sister. I stayed home in the cold house, ironing, and what not. For a couple of years we kids pretty much just raised ourselves. That, and grieved our mother.

## Old Times

"This is Junior," Ann said. As he sauntered to my deck, I took stock of him, a plastic Coke two liter at the end of his arm. Even before Ann's smile turned sheepish, I despised this fifty year old momma's boy with his sweet smell of rum. I shook his hand, and asked if they wanted a drink. Squishy with dead sweat, he slumped in a lawn chair.

"Just glasses," Ann said. "We've been swigging." Junior raised the two liter as if I might be fooled into thinking he'd paid for it, at least for the Coke. My wife brought out two glasses, and, despite the strong, June sun, she and I drank coffee.

Before I'd met my wife, Ann and her husband Hal and I had lived together. She'd stayed with Hal in New Hampshire thirty years, same house, four kids, until he ran into a tree one night after he'd worked a double shift. I had spoken at the funeral.

"He always wanted to be warm," Ann had told me. "And to travel," I'd said and wished I hadn't. She'd sold her house, bought a class C RV, and hauled Hal's ashes to North Carolina. She hadn't liked driving the RV and liked living alone even less. Her kids told me the story, Ann living in a tiny house, drinking, working retail at the local mall, getting fired, moving to a trailer, not a doublewide either, and picking up with a local man, who could never quite remember where he worked. She let her machine answer my calls and never returned them.

"You been to see the old homestead?" I asked Ann.

"Not sure I could bear it," she said.

Nothing sadder than to see this once pretty woman with glassy eyes sunk in a swollen face, and a smile gone lopsided.

"Nothing deader than the past," Junior said. No edges to him, he puddled in the chair's green webbing.

They drank through the impromptu dinner, Junior eating two burgers and a dog, Ann pushing beans around her plate. I said, "Looks like you better stay the night."

"You got the queen size?" Junior asked. I wanted to hit him. Ann giggled.

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In the morning as I got out of bed, I cursed Ann's drinking companion.

My wife said, "She and Hal used to tie one on."

"Not as an occupation," I answered.

"You used to join them."

"Rehash old times," I said.

"Ann's trying not to relive old times with Hal. And you ought to let her go."

Anne came down to the kitchen, looking neither worse, nor better. "Thanks," she said for the coffee I handed her. "For everything. We don't," she pointed upstairs, "Junior and me."

I added liar to all the things Junior had done to her.

"I hope things work out," I said, as much a liar as she.

## Kim Parko



Kim Parko's random playlist:

Laziest Gal In Town - Nina Simone  
You Go To My Head - Billie Holiday  
(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction - Cat Power  
Hey - Pixies  
All Along The Watchtower - Jimi Hendrix

## Crocheting The Ocean



Photo by Dorothy O'Connor

The whole of everything was covered in water. The whole of everything had within it one woman, and the one woman said, "Where is the lover?" She said it to the whole of everything. The whole of everything said, "The lover is beneath the water." The one woman wanted to find the lover, so she took out the stitch that tied the waves together. She

unraveled the fabric of the water and found herself moored in a small boat inside a little room. The little room was strewn with seaweed, and all around there were starfish and octopi and conchs gasping for water.

The lover was not in the room. "Damn lover!" the one woman said aloud in the room and was shocked by the way the sound came back to her without the water to obscure it. She heard for the first time, her own clear words. A crab said, "You should not damn the lover. Why would the lover come to the woman who damns it?" And the one woman said, "I'm sorry, I'm irritable; it feels like there is sand gritting my joints." The one woman thought about what the crab said and took a deep breath of the dryness surrounding her and then said, in a softer, sweeter voice, "Where art thou, fine lover?"

This went on. The one woman tried to cajole the lover to come to her.

After days of fruitless cajoling, the one woman noticed something she had never noticed before: a soft spot on her scales, smooth and porous. She noticed the spots on the crabs and the starfish. "What are these spots?" She asked the whole of everything. But about this matter, the whole of everything was silent.

The one woman missed the water. Her gritty joints pained her. Her gills were growing into tiny mouths with baby teeth pushing painfully through the gums.

The whole of everything saw that the one woman missed the water. The whole of everything knew that now the one woman would never be able to live, again, in the water. The whole of everything knew that the spots would continue to spread.

The whole of everything painted a picture of the water and gave it to the one woman and the one woman hung it in her room. The one woman would look at the picture and imagine the lover under the water. She scratched through the paint, trying to find the lover.

The whole of everything was dismayed at the one woman for scratching the painting. The whole of everything said, "That is the first painting I ever painted. I usually just make the thing itself, not its replica. I was proud of that painting and how my brush strokes were able to convey real waves and how I could catch the light of the sun on their crests. I have not even made the real sun yet."

The whole of everything thought, dejectedly, *Why did I make the lover?* But once the whole of everything made something, there was no taking it back.

The one woman tried to appease the whole of everything. The whole of everything had always been kind to the one woman, had even asked for her hand in marriage. But the whole of everything was just a voice that could make things. The one woman needed someone to touch; she needed the lover. She said to the whole of everything, "Can you paint me a picture of a ship? I would like to look at a picture of a ship with great, billowing sails. It will take my mind off this tiny boat."

The whole of everything made a magnificent painting of a ship and gave it to the one woman. She hung it in her room. She tried to imagine herself on the magnificent ship. She tried to feel the wind that inflated the sails. She tried to feel the speed of the ship skimming the limitless water. But her imagination could never entirely leave the small boat moored in the little room. And her attention waned from the paintings that the whole of everything was so proud of.

The whole of everything watched the one woman, solemn, in her boat. The whole of everything thought, "It is best if I leave the one woman alone. I cannot fulfill her and she will never marry me." So the whole of everything stopped speaking with the one woman.

The one woman was afraid without the whole of everything to ask questions to. Even when the whole of everything wouldn't answer, it was nice to know that something was listening. There was only one solution for the one woman: she had to knit the water back into being. She declared, "I will knit the water anew," to the room and to the water creatures who were slowly dying. She gathered the threads of the unraveled ocean and she took out her crocheting needles and began.

The one woman crocheted and crocheted and from her boat the ocean spilled over the side and spread around her. The conchs and the octopi and the starfish, they all went back into the water. The one woman was now covered in a smooth, porous skin. She drifted on the boat over the crocheted ocean. Somewhere beneath her was the lover.

## Joshua Mohr



Joshua Mohr's random playlist:

Fried My Little Brains - The Kills  
Let England Shake - PJ Harvey  
Observations in the Alley - The Secret Secretaries  
Jim - Swans  
Cherry Lips - Archie Bronson

## **Seducing The Dismal** - novel extract

Let's start this one when a cancer patient named No Eyebrows creeps into Damascus, a Mission District dive bar. For years the floor, walls, and ceiling had been painted entirely black, but that afternoon Owen, the bar's owner, added a new element, smashing twenty mirrors and gluing the shards to the ceiling. The pieces shimmered like stars, transforming Damascus into a planetarium for drunkards; dejected men and women stargazing from bar stools.

When the first customer of the day had walked in and noticed the bar's broken-mirror constellations, he said, "There must be 10,000 years of bad luck hanging here."

"That would certainly explain a few things," Owen said, who had a heinous birthmark underneath his nose that looked like a piece of sausage from a pizza.

Damascus always had rock and roll on the jukebox. Right then it was AC-DC, playing the only chord progression they knew and howling about salacious women, which was funny because Damascus had an almost exclusively male clientele. Old drunks talking to themselves, trying to barter with the bartender for the price of a Corona. Surly construction workers who drank from the minute they got off work until last call. "Off-duty" mariachis getting more tone deaf with each tilt of tequila, wearing matching black outfits spotted with silver buckles that made them look like decorated war veterans. Insipid twenty-something Caucasian boys, their cheeks stuffed with carbohydrates and college degrees, wowed by their own flickering wits: "Here's to honor," one would say, "getting on her and staying on her."

There were few female regulars, and one who haunted the place was Shambles. She had acne scars all over, her cragged cheeks were pocked like the mirror-shards glued to the bar's ceiling. Her hair had been bleached too many times: tips brittle, broken, crooked. Frayed bangs fell down to her eyebrows like tassels and pointed a million directions. Her eyes used to be blue, but they'd faded to matte gray.

Shambles was the patron saint of the hand job, getting strangers off for less than the price of a parking ticket. So far, she'd done only one, though there would be more fondling to finance her bar tab. The night was young and full of fisted opportunities.

No Eyebrows stood next to Shambles' stool and ordered a double shot of peppermint schnapps. He liked to drink it because the taste reminded him of mouthwash, in a way that stoked his hostile nostalgia, reminded him that there had been days, real days where he used mouthwash and had a family. Days long before they found tumours stuck to his lungs like poisonous barnacles.

Owen placed the huge shot down on the bar, and as No Eyebrows reached for it with a shaking hand, Shambles looked at his sallow skin, the way it clung to him like a layer of film on cold chicken broth. Most people were shocked by his appearance because he reinforced the fact that everyone was going to die. People pursed their lips and averted their eyes, shaming him into near invisibility with their avoidances as they tried not to ogle the prowling dead.

Shambles, however, wasn't deterred or deflected or weirded out by his appearance. She saw him as a business opportunity, dollar signs, an untapped member of the masturbation market. But she wouldn't establish eye contact with him during the act itself; she never did with any of 'em.

"Do you mind if I drink with you?" Shambles said to No Eyebrows, then asked Owen to pour her another whiskey.

"I'd like that," No Eyebrows said. "Thanks."

Owen brought her drink and said, "This is your last shot." He wasn't cutting her off, per se. Owen wasn't one to micro-manage another lush's consumption. It wasn't Shambles' drunkenness that he monitored, but her cavalier attitude toward men. He resented how openly she flaunted her zeal to fondle the customers because the only hands that had been on him in over a year were the incidental brushes with customers. Often he felt like a person collecting tolls at a bridge, interacting with hundreds, thousands of people every day, but never knowing any of them. They approached, idled, vanished, and he was stuck in his tiny shack, Damascus in this case, awaiting the next impatient exchange.

Shambles frowned at Owen's warning. She waved him away. Though he could be testy he was a nice man, but definitely grumpy. Not to mention his birthmark. She tried not to stare at it every time they spoke, but she couldn't help herself: it was like a third nipple on his upper lip.

"Why are you thanking me for drinking with you?" she said to No Eyebrows.

"I was raised right. Cheers," he said, holding his schnapps up in the air like a Bible in a minister's hand, a retrofit prop to shore up the fragile world.

Instead of echoing *Cheers*, though, Shambles crashed her glass into his, spilling whiskey on her fingers, and said, "To livers aching like shin splints."

He laughed. They drained their shots. Faces flushed from the spirits. Humidity spreading through their private ecosystems.

"I've never seen you here before," she said.

"First time."

"What brought you into this dump?"

"I was incredibly parched."

"You don't seem like you have much in common with these deadbeats."

He pointed at some of the men nearby. "Doesn't that make them the lucky ones?"

Shambles didn't know how to respond to this, didn't know what to do with that kind of tactless honesty amongst strangers, especially in bars where men and women typically honed their deceit, cloaked in personas. Deception was the norm: cab drivers claimed they were venture capitalists; rickety alcoholics morphed into ex-athletes; anonymous office workers were recently retired from the cubicle because of an important invention - one even tried to convince a woman that he masterminded the Caps Lock key.

Every interchange was a con.

Every night a pitiful costume party.

Except here was No Eyebrows blowing the whole cycle of charades for everyone else. He had the audacity to be heartfelt, and what was Shambles supposed to do with someone showing honesty?

So instead of answering him directly, she turned her attention to commerce: "How'd you like to get off?"

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As soon as they were in Damascus' bathroom, he yanked his pants down. Shambles locked the door, showed him a rubber. "It's twenty bucks with this." She shook the little silver square back and forth, business savvy. "Forty without." She pulled a lube-tube from her purse and squirted it in her palm, working it around.

The bathroom light fluttered off and on, a faulty bulb, making a noise like a fly smacking into a window.

"Forty, forty," No Eyebrows said, bending at the waist and fumbling through his pockets for money. He stood up and gave her two twenties.

"My rules," she said, "Don't touch me. Don't cum on me. Or I'll scream." This was the same canned speech she reeled off to everyone she brought in here.

"Of course. I'll even buy you a drink later," said No Eyebrows, hoping this offer would make him feel less seedy. But it actually made him feel worse, its macho predictability.

"Chivalrous," she said, almost laughing. This was what passed for small talk while your hand was lodged in a man's crotch. She slid her wet fist down him, noticing he was so bald that he didn't even have pubic hair, just tiny red sores on his abdomen. "You must be from Camelot."

"Kansas City originally," he smiled at her, but she didn't smile back.

"Does that feel good?" Shambles said.

"It feels great," he said, closing his eyes so he didn't have to watch the droopy thing flop around. God damn chemo. Closing his eyes so nothing existed except her hand on his body.

"Faster?"

"Just keep touching me."

Shambles maintained her speed, looked at him more closely since he'd cinched his eyes. She didn't understand what he was doing at Damascus in the first place. He was sick, no doubt seriously sick, yet here he was in the bar's bathroom with his pants around his ankles.

Someone jiggled the locked door and knocked on it.

"Just a minute," Shambles said, increasing her speed.

No Eyebrows moaned feebly. Grinned. Remembered when his wife used to touch his body. He'd taken it all for granted, every fingertip across his skin. The way his wife, Sally used to run her hands through his hair when he couldn't sleep, and now there was no hair. No hair, no wife, no daughter, no chance of living more than another couple months. He'd removed himself from his family, vanishing from the North Bay into San Francisco, because what was the point of prolonging a life mired in illness? Why postpone death, if it was the only way to hush the squealing reality that he'd never see his daughter grow up? He stopped going to his appointments at the hospital. Prescriptions unfilled. Phone calls never returned. If these were his last weeks, he wouldn't waste them saving himself.

Now No Eyebrows glanced at Shambles, who averted her gaze to the ceiling's wavering light. For some reason, it was harder to resist eye contact with him—something about his whole honest spiel, the way his disease was exposed while the rest of us tried to veil our glitches and bankruptcies and stale sins. Shambles found him enticing, which hadn't happened in a long time, a man seeming to be anything besides a danger, a liability.

Someone knocked on the door again.

"More time," Shambles said.

"Why can't I touch you?" No Eyebrows said.

Her hand slowed down. She wanted to look at him but beat back the urge. "It's one of my rules."

"I know. But I'm wondering why."

Still resisting, her eyes fixed up on the shuddering light: "Because I'm not a whore."

"How would that make you a whore if I touched your shoulder?"

"Don't touch my shoulder."

"I'm not going to."

"Do you want me to stop?" She let go of him and he shook his head. "Then don't ask any more questions."

"Please, I need you to touch me."

"No more questions." She fumbled for his penis, squeezed it harder.

"Do you like that?" she said, and he said, "Don't stop touching me," and someone knocked on the door again and No Eyebrows threw his head back: every disappearing detail of his disappearing life dwindled while Shambles touched his body, and he felt pleasure, actual pleasure. This was the first hand on him in months that didn't belong to a doctor or nurse, and thirty seconds later he came, gasping for air and life and hope.

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She let a few moments go by so he could gather himself, then Shambles turned around to wash her hands, using Damascus' green soap that smelled like menthol cigarettes. Finally, she let herself look him in the eyes and asked, "Why were you asking about my touching rule?"

"I don't understand it."

"I don't know you."

"I don't know you either, and I need you to touch me," No Eyebrows said.

"Why?"

He pointed at his face. "Do you know who wants to touch this monster?"

She didn't say anything, shook her head slowly. She saw his disease all over him, and she wondered what he saw in her. Probably a has-been, a hooker. She couldn't blame him. Her sicknesses were harder to inspect, caged under the skin, captives within a captive.

"No one wants to touch me," he said.

"I want to." She didn't know what else to say, what was there to say? "You're not a monster; lots of people are sick."

"This is all that's left of me," he said, still pointing at his gaunt face. "I'm withering."

"It's okay," Shambles said and pointed at her own face. "So am I." Then she sent her finger toward the wall, indicating the other deadbeats in Damascus. "We all are."

The bathroom's failing light bulb kept flashing, stuttering, buzzing.

"Can I pay to touch your shoulder?" he said.

"My shoulder?"

"Please." He stuck a hand in his pocket, pulling out some more money. He counted forty and held it out to her. "I want to feel your skin. Nothing dirty, I promise. Just your shoulder."

How could Shambles deny him such a naked want? And how could she accept any money if touching her shoulder was going to mean so much?

She shook her head, pushed his hand away, didn't answer until their eyes locked again. "I don't want your money."

"Please take it."

"No."

"Please," he begged.

"I don't want it," she said and stepped forward and took him in her arms, right there in Damascus' bathroom. She hugged him and he hugged her, and they stood. An old Tom Waits song seeped through the walls from the jukebox, the sink dripped, the toilet ran, and the light flickered its paltry wattage like the gloomiest disco ball in the world.

## Lindsay Hunter



Lindsay Hunter's random playlist:

Don't You Know What The Night Can Do - Steve Winwood

J.O.D.D. - Trick Daddy

Strong As I Am - Prime Movers

Queen Of Hearts - Fucked Up

Bulldozers And Dirt - The Drive-By Truckers

## **Office Lady**

Hey office lady. I see you there with your Rolodex. You know what I'm going to do for you? I'm going to change out this water jug one-handed, but first Imma spill a few drops into your lap and dab them up with this powerful organ in my mouth. And by that I mean my tongue. Because I'm a man. And I can tell by my reflection in this duck painting that I look good. You know what a man does? Lays his finger to the side of his nose to catch the grease, then dips that finger into his beer head and voila, that head goes down. Yeah I mentioned going down. You heard of it? I just want to take that packet of pens and spill it on your naked back. African rain I call that. You be a good girl and I'll also bestow Brazilian rain upon you. You get me? Where's your boss? Don't answer that because he's right here. I'm pointing at me. I'm your boss. Get me a coffee and dip your undies in it because I like my coffee with a nip of cream. I'm a man, Miss Office Lady. Who's in that picture frame? I like kids but I don't like boyfriends. I don't like husbands. And guess what I don't like friends in picture frames either. You ever been to a zoo and seen the apes? You ever seen the apes and thought, those hairy abominations, that hairy one in the corner touching himself with his leather fingers, that's a man? When you think of that you think of me. I once saw this ape eat a red pepper then spit out the seeds. Me, I like red cherries and I don't spit. Think about that. You take dic-tations? You get it? You ever been stapled? On purpose I mean. Never mind. We'll get to that. You cold? Put on that cardigan you got hanging over your chair. Do it slow. I want to see you try to button it over those things. You pop a button I'll catch it with my teeth. Pick up that phone and dial S-E-X-F-U-N and guess what my belt's gonna vibrate and Imma put you on speaker so you can hear yourself begging. Imma pick up the phone saying What am I and you know how you'll answer? A man. Go ahead and cry if you need to because I love being flattered. Yeah lick that envelope. Get that corner real good. I see you got them unnatural sticker stamps, we'll have to correct that. Let's go in the back and make a Xerox of your jigglies. Let's refill your stapler. Let's hole-punch your bra so them nipples can breathe. Go on. Get out them Post-Its and write yourself a reminder to thank God for man.

You got too much shit on your desk. And I don't prefer hard candy, I like my afternoon snacks to have a nougat center. Imma take that stone with Tranquility etched into it and rub it on you until it's just a rock. You callous easy? And you should know I'm a finger man. But I can't be touchin you when your skin sprouts so many hairs. And I can't be lickin my fingers

to separate one of your parts from another. Don't want to. Show me to the supply closet and I'll get us some rubber finger pads, size Man. I'll take one for each of these pleasure givers. So that's ten. Good news for you, they make gripping real easy. You like foreplay? Because I don't. I like to cut to the chase, call a spade a spade, I'm a straight shooter, I'm a man among men, I prefer my glass half empty, I don't wear no pink glasses, I'll take the milk and the cow, that's you, you're the cow, I'm not little and I'm not yellow and I hope you like aches and pains, I'm easy breezy gonna measure your entry spot with that ruler you got from the work picnic last summer, I already know you're a size Q pantyhose, Q for Quit talkin chubby. You like smelling stuff? Because I like watching you get a whiff of something. A man breaks wind and a man don't apologize and a man always lets his lady sniff the ruler. I like chocolate chip pancakes in the morning with chocolate malt milk and I hope you know how to cook because Mother don't wake up until noon, and by that time I'll be here with you, refilling your water cooler and watching you suck on that hard candy like you never heard of an innuendo. So get ready because come 5 I'll be in the van outside waitin for you, rubbin at myself like that ape in his cage, only I'll have them rubber fingertips on because then it's just like anyone else doing it, and I'll be thinkin about you and cherries and your nasty, nasty, nasty desk. And so help me don't you forget the paper clips.

## **A D Jameson**



A D Jameson's random playlist:

My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue) - Neil Young  
The Wizard - Albert Ayler  
Runaway - Kanye West  
Reoccurring Dreams - Hüsker Dü  
Imaginary Landscape No. 1 - John Cage

## A Dozen Dominants: The Current State Of US Indy Lit

To inquire into the state of contemporary US writing—which we'll acknowledge from the get-go is an impossible task, even if we narrow our scope to only "indy lit" or "small press lit"—is to secretly ask, "What aspects of writing do writers most value in the here and now? Which norms do they adhere to, either consciously or (more likely) unconsciously? What conventions do their readers expect to be followed?" Those valued aspects or norms or conventions are our *dominants* (I've taken the term from Roman Jakobson): pressures that "[rule, determine and transform] the remaining components" of any given work.

*Broadly speaking*, of course: different writers, different scenes, different journals and presses are—we hope—invested in doing different things. But those separate pools (if you'll forgive me a complex metaphor) are each in turn subject to the same tidal forces exerted by these dominants, a dozen small moons dangling low on the horizon, almost (just like in the Calvino) close enough to touch. Let's reach out our hands.

### 1. Irony

Possibly an outgrowth of 1960s counterculture (and its seed crystals, the Beats and Black Humorists of the 1950s), irony is now transcendent in many, if not most, US subcultures. It is a defense mechanism, a protection against increasingly authoritative authority. It offers authors the chance to engage with any and all materials. Do you want to write a literary zombie novel? Then write an *ironic* zombie novel. (Can you even conceive of a *sincere* zombie novel being literary? I doubt that many in indy lit can.)

### 2. Brevity

Online journals regularly limit the length of prose submissions to under 3000 words, and 2000 isn't uncommon. (The limit for this article was 1500 words; I went 500 over.) This is doubtlessly a consequence of the fact that the Internet is now the dominant medium in the US. Most indy journals are now online (either partially or wholly), and today's writers have either grown up with, or grown accustomed to, e-literature (which includes forms like email, text messaging, Twitter, and Facebook posts). The lingering dominance (since the 1970s) of Minimalism in music, the visual arts, and design is another contributing factor.

### 3. Twee

A certain clever preciousness has taken hold in many American arts. It's easily observable in independent film (Mike Mills and Miranda July might be this dominant's reigning couple, Wes Anderson, their jester, Michael Cera their adopted ~~talking-cat~~ son; Guy Maddin, meanwhile, is court wizard); one also commonly finds it in indy music (the list here is endless, but must include The Decemberists and Beach House). The visual arts are no less immune; witness the resurgence of printmaking and artist's books, which are focused on making ephemeral objects that will be treasured—and think of Gorey-influenced, fine-line illustrations of deer and bears in the forest, dressed up in scarves and sweaters. (Recall also the recent trend of

knitting sweaters for trees.) Mc Sweeney's, with its penchant for old-timey fonts and archaic syntax, is this dominant's best non-required reading.

Two dovetails nicely with brevity, as well as with our next two dominants:

#### 4. Cleanliness

We live in a none-too-messy time. Many of the designs around us, especially of technological objects, are clean and minimal. The biggest contributing factor here, I believe, is digital production; as it's steadily effaced analog means, starting in the early 1980s, most aesthetics in the US have, correspondingly, been getting cleaner.

#### 5. Nostalgia

Despite the widely-held belief that today's culture changes quickly, the opposite might be true. US pop culture has changed surprisingly little over the past fifty years. Try the following thought experiment: what did art (film, fashion, literature) from 1910 look like in 1960? Dated, out of place. But what does art from 1960 look like today? Cool, contemporary, still relevant.

We've continued emulating a great deal of the 1960s (and even the 1950s) in our clothing, music, writing, filmmaking, and other visual arts. My pet hypothesis is that, mass media—in particular film, television, and magazines—is keeping us more in contact with the 1960s than folks then were with the '10s. Today, the past tends to stick around more.

This trend is strengthening; folks now speak openly about the *inevitability* of nostalgia for previous decades ("it's only a matter of time before the '90s nostalgia happens"). At the same time, corporations have realized that childhood attachments strongly influence purchasing habits, so don't expect them to stop selling childhoods back anytime soon. (The question instead is, what do we do about this?)

#### 6. Foregrounded Language

Very often I hear indy lit friends say, "I started reading Book X, but I just couldn't get past *the language*." By which they mean prose that is too plain; the current preference by far is for clever, strongly stylized writing. This view is exemplified by John Madera in his 23 January 2011 *Big Other* post "The National Book Critics Circle Finalists for 2010 Awards":

"I don't have time to give writers my attention beyond a few lines or paragraphs, or, in some cases, a few pages. Unless I'm reviewing a book, if my interest isn't captured within that narrow stretch of time and space, then I have to move on to something else. There are just too many great books for me to catch up on that I just can't see myself trudging along after a weak opening. [...] It's hard for me to get past [...] clichés and generally dull observations."

John then quotes the opening of Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask*, claiming: "Here we find what we expect from an accomplished author, that is, careful attention to language." (For more on this topic, see my response, "The Barthelme Problem," where I say a great deal more about the "Prose of Constant Surprise, writing willing to make dazzling departures with each new sentence.")

## 7. Concept

Conceptual art broke big in the visual, music, and performing arts in the 1960s, and was even then a rather literary form (the conceptual pieces of John Cage, Yoko Ono, La Monte Young, Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Allan Kaprow, and their contemporaries were all very writerly). Since then, concept has been increasingly finding its way into literature proper. Today it is exemplified primarily in works made by the Oulipo, Flarf Poets, and "conceptual poets" like Kenneth Goldsmith, and Vanessa Place, to name only its two most visibly vocal proponents.

Concept, intriguingly, is one realm where indy lit proves congruous with the mainstream; one need look no farther than *Cowboys & Aliens*, to see how widely concept has taken root in the culture.

## 8. Parataxis

The word may be an unfamiliar one, but the effect it describes is not. Parataxis is "the placing together of sentences, clauses, or phrases without a conjunctive word or words, as in *Hurry up, it is getting late! I came—I saw—I conquered.*" The Language Poets, Post Language Poets, and many disciples of Ben Marcus, all share a fondness for parataxical, abrasive juxtapositions - Gertrude Stein's Cubist-inspired influence writ large. Postmodernism's "incredulity toward metanarratives" as Lyotard phrased it) only increased the serious artist's fondness for (or begrudging acceptance of) fragmentation and juxtaposition—leading us to our next dominant:

## 9. Collage

- which Donald Barthelme famously called "the central principle of all art in the 20th century." A preoccupation of many since Modernism, this organizing practice was shared by indy-lit darlings as disparate as Gertrude Stein, T.S.Eliot, Flann O'Brien, William S Burroughs, B.S. Johnson, Kathy Acker, and of course Mr. Barthelme himself ("Fragments are the only form I trust.").

And it's spilled over into daily life as well. John Cage's 1930s experience of wandering through a suburb, listening to radios and phonographs playing in various homes while intermingled with the sounds of the environment, seems today almost quaint. Our urbanized world has since then grown ever louder, intrusive, fragmentary. We pause skimming Facebook to text message while YouTube plays in the background (our one headphone in, the other dangling). Some claim that attention spans have decreased, and that might be so, but I think we're instead conditioned to expect the heterogeneous, leaving us confused - and suspiciously impatient - in the present of the homogenous.

## 10. A-narrative

This is perhaps an outgrowth of several other dominants; it's understandably hard to craft a coherent story in fewer than 1000 precious, language-conscious words. Other factors at work might be postmodernism's suspicion of all narratives, grand or otherwise; Language Poetry's fervent avoidance of syllogism; and the New Narrative's desire to foreground the artificiality (and ultimate *insufficiency*) of narrative as an organizing form. Not to mention the fact that genre fiction simply loves narrative (especially long narratives like trilogies and septologies) - so what better way to announce oneself as a "serious" writer than to do away with story altogether?

Furthermore, even realist writing rarely seems narrative any more. The "stories" encountered in university reviews are less centered around the progression of causal actions (plot) than the illustration of character psychology, resulting in prose that reads more like character studies than *tales*. Such works still utilize many of the a-narrative tropes established in the '70s and '80s by writers like Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Gordon Lish, and Joy Williams - for instance the common use of white space breaks to avoid having to write causal connective tissue between scenes. (Again, we see fragmentation, discontinuity.)

*A-narrative*, mind you, is not the same thing as *anti-narrative*. The latter kicks against narrative's prick, whereas the former is the diminishment of story's importance. I have in fact seen very little underground writing that looks directly influenced by authors such as John Barth, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, William S. Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon. Rather, their anti-narrative concerns, which fueled much underground writing in the 1950s through 1980s, seem to have gone *mainstream*, possibly due to the influence of their fellow traveler Philip K. Dick: if you want metafiction and strange loops and ontological uncertainty, you need merely to pop in a DVD copy of *The Matrix*, or *Inception*, or *Fight Club*, or your favorite entry in the *Auston Powers* trilogy.

## 11. Vulgarity

Or "common interests." Ever since Impressionism and French Symbolist poetry (the true birth of the Modern), mundane materials have served as the "high" artist's proper subjects. We no longer write poems about Aphrodite and Athena, or even Love and Wisdom; rather, we write about middle-class relationships and clever (or even semi-clever) moments.

This dominant, too, helps separate underground writing from mainstream; the latter prizes much "loftier" subjects, stuff more eternal and escapist. It values *fantasy*: the success of the Harry Potter books and movies, the *Lord of the Rings* films, the *Twilight* series, and movies based on comic books has ensured a non-stop parade of wizards, vampires, zombies, superheroes, and Hobbits through our cineplexes and bookshelves—and spawned thousands of imitations. Alternative lit, unsurprisingly, deigns not to follow that mainstream trend. (If I pen a 2000-page fantasy trilogy about a war between Hobbits and vampires, I'm not exactly an indie writer.)

This overwhelming tendency toward the mundane has, arguably, evolved into our final dominant:

## 12. Confession

This is an emerging (or reemerging) influence, exemplified primarily by writers like Tao Lin (Richard Yates, *Shoplifting from American Apparel*) and the ensuing popularity of the memoir. Which is no doubt influenced by the increasing preponderance of social media (blogs, Facebook, FourSquare, Twitter). I expect this one to grow.

A final note: none of these dominants are necessarily mutually exclusive, and many in fact go hand in hand, reinforcing one another. Individual writers, also, may feel more pressure from one or two than from any of the others; many authors may, too, be writing *in opposition* to these received values. I of course invite conversation and debate along all of these lines.

But for now, from my admittedly limited vantage point in Chicago, late in the summer of 2011, these dozen dominants look like the current zodiac of small press literary life. ... What's your sign?

### **Matthew Salesses**



Matthew Salesses' random playlist:

Thursday - Asobi Seksu  
Knife - Grizzly Bear  
Don't Look Back - She & Him  
Angela Surf City - The Walkmen  
5:15 Train - A Sunny Day in Glasgow

Three connected flash pieces from Matthew's collection *I'm Not Saying, I'm Just Saying*.

## **Tom**

We agreed that the boy should get a second chance. Or she agreed and I understood that she loved me again. Could love replace a murdered pet? I looked at kittens online. I wanted to keep the boy away from animals until I believed his repentance. He pointed at each jpg and said, "That one." I thought, wait for the one he doesn't like. He had liked Jerry, and he had treated Jerry like a science experiment. In bed, while I was still tender, the wifely woman said, "He needs to know we don't blame him." I thought, once a tiger tastes man. Once a man tastes tiger. But I wanted a new kitten, too. I missed that silent reliance, noiseless until the purr in your lap. The Scottish fold seemed to frighten the boy, its ears limp, as if broken. "That one," I told the wifely woman.

## **Which One Is a Bull Market?**

I wanted to start a business, I just didn't know what kind. I was tired of looking for a job. The world seemed open to me then. The wifely woman made money. What did I know? I knew what helped things sell, or what people thought helped. There was a difference. It was the difference between commission and salary—I never earned what I earned. I told the wifely woman the first step was admitting my problem. She said, "You're a success at quitting." She said, "It doesn't work if you stage your own intervention." I said, "I didn't quit I was fired." I went straight to asking for money. I knew she was good for it.

## **Into That Good Night**

I picked a floundering product as a point of pride. Ads were a type of death. Progress seemed designing book covers. Books were already goners, or so writers kept writing. I could help them go gently. I jinxed the business before it began, celebrating at a pub. People there were full of intentions. Randy had the idea to get the jinx out of the way first. "Everyone gets ruined," he said, "at some point." The wifely woman wanted a curfew. I gave in but didn't give up. At midnight, I was in pajamas, designing drunk. I practiced on the books I knew—*The Moderate Gatsby*, *In the Heart of the Armpit of the Country*. But as I clothed them, I didn't want them to die. Before, I'd undressed their words like anyone else, craving nudity. Now I shook off my skin and covered them. The night was young and full of self-hatred.

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