

THE LINEUP

20 Provocative Women Writers

Edited by Richard Thomas
Foreword by Alissa Nutting



Black
Lawrence
Press

“Writing is...being able to take something whole and fiercely alive that exists inside you in some unknowable combination of thought, feeling, physicality, and spirit, and to then store it like a genie in tense, tiny black symbols on a calm white page. If the wrong reader comes across the words, they will remain just words. But for the right readers, your vision blooms off the page and is absorbed into their minds like smoke, where it will re-form, whole and alive, fully adapted to its new environment.”

—Mary Gaitskill

“My belief is that art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish.”

—Joyce Carol Oates

“Don’t let the bastards grind you down.”

—Margaret Atwood

Contents

Foreword by Alissa Nutting	ix
Introduction by Richard Thomas	xvi
<i>Holly Goddard Jones</i>	
Parts	I
<i>Tina May Hall</i>	
Skinny Girls' Constitution and Bylaws	29
<i>Ethel Rohan</i>	
Lifelike	36
<i>Monica Drake</i>	
See You Later, Fry-O-Lator	39
<i>Janet Mitchell</i>	
The Creepy Girl Story	58
<i>Shannon Cain</i>	
This Is How It Starts	65
<i>Nancy Hightower</i>	
Mereá	81
<i>Kim Chinquee</i>	
Shot Girls	94

<i>Jessica Hollander</i>		
Like Falling Down and Laughing		112
<i>Kathy Fish</i>		
Blooms		130
<i>Karin Tidbeck</i>		
Jagannath		142
<i>Paula Bomer</i>		
A Galloping Infection		157
<i>Karen Brown</i>		
Stillborn		167
<i>Stacey Levine</i>		
The World of Barry		191
<i>Amina Gautier</i>		
Push		196
<i>Damien Angelica Walters</i>		
They Make of You a Monster		206
<i>Claire Vaye Watkins</i>		
Rondine al Nido		219
<i>Nina McConigley</i>		
Pomp and Circumstances		237
<i>Laura Benedict</i>		
When I Make Love to the Bug Man		258
<i>Kelly Luce</i>		
Rooney		276
Author Bios		299
100 Women to Watch		305

Foreword

Alissa Nutting

I'll always remember the first hate letter I read while breastfeeding. Actually, it was a hate email, nestled between listserv mailings and bizarre SPAM offers (“*increase ur ejaculate 400%!!!!*”) that to a sleep-deprived new parent seemed too fascinating to delete without at least a cursory read-through. My daughter was just a few months old, and I'd finally reached a point of exhaustion that broke into the realm of the hallucinatory: paint often appeared to be moving on the walls, and if I stared at anything for more than a few seconds, its surface took on a sheer overlay of what appeared to be magnified, moving bacterial life. It was almost fun, though the repeating soundtrack of a screaming baby did somewhat harsh the trippy mellow these visuals might have provided in a different context. But one activity that seemed to mesh well with late-night feedings was to scroll through my email inbox, moving from one to another in a way that defied the filtering process and made the context of each one a surprise—photo-laden messages from friends kaleidoscoped

into colorful HTML coupon offers from pizza delivery chains; these images burned away into the black and white ash of text-heavy editorial and professional emails, only to be followed by the rising phoenix of a newsletter mailing with an embedded lo-fi GIF that I might stare at for seconds or hours.

Then, suddenly, the hate email.

I am very much a learner and a student in this universe, but I do feel qualified to dole out this small piece of acquired wisdom: if it's possible for you to avoid publishing a darkly obscene comic novel about a female pedophile while you're also in the throes of postpartum depression and insomnia, maybe you should avoid it.

This is not to say that now, from a place of much greater balance and safety than I felt at the time, that I regret these events happened to coincide. It became one of the most defining periods of my life. The lessons I learned, particularly in the work of personal boundaries and emotional perspective, now seem a very fair trade in exchange for my trauma. Public scrutiny, much like the pain of birth, much like the early months of motherhood, had been something I'd told myself I was adequately prepared for. Before all three of these experiences, I'd felt certain that I'd had the mental infrastructure to endure whatever might happen. I was sure I would not succumb to paralyzing levels of distress.

I was incorrect in all three cases. With all three, at times the pain was much greater than my pride wants to publicly admit. Much greater than I felt I could take, wanted to take, and had imagined taking.

On that early morning when I came across the email, the light of my laptop's screen illuminating my naked chest and my daughter's closed eye and working mouth, I did not delete it without hesitation. I read it multiple times. The things it was saying about me, about the

severity of my multiple defects of character, echoed loudly off of the core insecurities that likely steered me toward provocative writing and art in the first place, and in that moment I believed every word some stranger who'd never met me (and who hadn't actually read my novel *Tampa* that they were so offended by) had to say. I remember having to fight the urge to forcibly unlatch my daughter from my body: I felt like a poison well, like I was such a corrupt source that drinking my milk could cause her harm. When I came across other such letters during other feedings, this thought often returned. For a while I stopped looking at email during feedings, and then I stopped looking at email altogether—for a while. I turned entirely to provocative fiction and poetry, as I do during all my most desperate times.

During this period, I remember having a phone conversation with a friend who kept asking me the question of *why*. She was being supportive, but she was also understandably confused about the pain I was experiencing given my agency in the process. I'd chosen to write and publish the book, after all. "I just don't see why you'd willingly do that to yourself," she kept saying. I was lucky to have an enormous amount of support, both for me as a person and for the book, but at first I had a lot of difficulty hearing and feeling it—what actually echoed most in my brain at the time were not the sharp words of strangers but of friends, people who truly love me and could not reconcile the person they knew with the novel I'd written. "I think you're very talented," they'd often begin, kindly attempting to soften the coming blow. "But why in the hell would you write a book like *that*?"

Choice has always been an interesting concept to me in terms of art and writing. While I arguably choose the books I read, the films I watch, the subjects I write about, my instinct for and obsession with

extremity has always felt preassigned. As a child, I remember secretly catching the first glimpse of a horror movie on my grandmother's cable television while she was doing dishes—I'd changed the channel from cartoons not sure what I was seeking exactly, but when I came to the horror movie I knew I'd found it. I had the sensation of transgressing in triplicate: what I was seeing was inappropriate on a moral level, plus it was inappropriate for my age, plus I knew that as a young girl I was not supposed to be drawn to things that were gross or gory.

As I grew and came to further understand the social prescriptions for my gender, extreme art became more and more of a sanctuary from these limitations. I saw a culture that said active sexuality, obscenity, and violence were male territories and expressions of power that were not open to women. Encountering and producing provocative art and writing—art that produced feelings of reverence, surprise, and disgust inside of me—was the way I could see beyond the limitations of the gendered social instructions I received on a daily basis. It freed me from them. That feeling of freedom is vital to my desire to be alive in the world. I understand that if I stop writing things that feel off-limits to me, if I stop reading and viewing things that feel off-limits to me, that freedom will atrophy. It is not a muscle society wants me to strengthen; it's not a space the mainstream feels should be accessible, particularly to women.

This is why the books I write will most likely always be books "like *that*," always gleaming with vulgarity, always unsettling. As a female author, I feel like vulgarity is a tree in my forest that the mainstream wants to chop down and harvest. So I've climbed it; I've taken up residence inside of it to prevent their saws from running. Obscenity is a natural artistic resource, and I will not let the status quo lay claim to it and haul it away to fuel its own historical purposes.

It might sound silly to say that raunchy, grotesque, and disturbing literature is what invariably keeps me going, but it's true. There's a politeness and an order to daily life that I often experience as deceitful, so much so that it can feel crazy at times. Provocative writing and art is a restorative form of honesty. For many like myself, it's one that is vital to sanity. I do not believe I could survive without it.

This is my "why"—why I have to write what I do and either adapt to endure the consequences that come alongside it (this is my preference) or mitigate the consequences through pseudonyms or by continuing to write but ceasing to publish. I'm extremely privileged in that the censure I've received is hardly worth mentioning compared to the consequences others have faced for their writing. I want to acknowledge and thank the provocative female writers who have been ostracized and threatened to the point of having to leave their homes, communities or countries. Who have lost their jobs or families. Who have been jailed, tortured, executed. Let us continue to thank and acknowledge these authors by reading and supporting provocative writing by women authors, particularly women authors whom various forms of intersectional oppression, such as transmisogyny and misogynoir, seek to keep silent. Our freedom and survival truly depend on actively fighting and dismantling the abusive frameworks that will acknowledge or tolerate the provocative writing of women of certain races, sexualities, gender identities, gender expressions, and social categories while excluding or repudiating the provocative writing of women of other races, sexualities, gender identities, gender expressions, etc.

I also want to acknowledge that my introduction to this anthology, and the anthology's final table of contents, are changes from the initial manuscript. While I feel it's my place to introduce

the current anthology rather than to comment on these internet-searchable events, I do feel it's important for me to acknowledge and express gratitude for the provocative fiction of all the authors who were a part of this anthology at any point. My feelings surrounding the decision to write this introduction are congruent in many ways with my feelings surrounding the decision to craft pieces of provocative fiction: I worried about what others would think of me if I did write it vs. if I didn't; I worried what I'd think about myself if I did write it vs. if I didn't; I thought about the places where those categories were similar and where they differed.

Ultimately, in thinking about what I'd write for this introduction, I had an epiphany I feel very excited to share: the thing I love most about a great story of provocative fiction is that despite being drawn to it, despite feeling enriched by it, it's impossible to feel completely good about. It contains at least one thing that is chilling and repellant that the power of the text forces us to move through despite our reservations. We cannot escape the piece without confronting fear or abjection. I need provocative fiction because it helps me remember I cannot ever fully protect myself. It centers my attention in all the very places I try to avoid. My former professor Dave Hickey once said, "Art is what tells you things are not going to be okay." I hope you find in this collection a story that does indeed affirm for you this agonizing truth—how things are not alright—in a way that is profoundly unsettling, yes, but also helps this actuality feel a bit less lonely. I know I found many.

Alissa Nutting

March 9, 2015

Cleveland, Ohio

Introduction

Richard Thomas

If you just got done reading the foreword by Alissa Nutting, please feel free to skip ahead to the stories. If you would like to read my brief thoughts on this collection, then do continue.

When I think of the word *provocative*, there are certain images and connotations that come to mind, and yes, some of them have to do with sex. This collection is not about sexuality, although there certainly are some arousing moments. This collection is about taking risks, about getting strong reactions. That's how I think of the word *provocative*—provoking, defiant, edgy and enticing. Every story in here provoked a significant reaction from me. For some it was about loss, the sadness that overwhelms you—that pain and void created by absence and death. For others it was about the lengths we go to as human beings in order to fit in, to be accepted, and to belong. And for a few others it was the humor and self-deprecation that arises out of youth, failure and the things we do for love.

Yes, part of the reason I started thinking about putting together an anthology like this was because of the articles I've read over the past few years about the lack of recognition for women in literature—be it anthologies, magazines, awards, or even photo shoots. I am not rescuing anybody here, there are no white horses, these women do not need my support in order to succeed—they are already succeeding.

What I can definitely say about these authors is that each and every one of them has influenced my life as a reader, a writer, a teacher, an editor and a person. Some, I've known for years—having read tons of their stories, and many (or all) of their novels. Others are relatively new to me. But as I read more and more of their stories in literary journals and genre magazines, I started to create a list of names, people I wanted to seek out, to read more—voices to keep an eye on. I've met many of these writers in person at various conferences, have done readings with a few of them, or just applauded from the audience here in Chicago. For several years now this book has been coming together, the release date so far in the future that I thought it might never get here. And while all of that was happening, book contracts were being signed, film rights were being sold, collections came out, and more stories were published. It gives me such a thrill to see all of these authors succeeding, because I know how great they really are, how powerful their work is, and how important it is to read them.

I hope you enjoy this anthology—this has been a labor of love. These are some of my favorite stories, by some of my favorite authors. When people ask me for a good story to read, I often point to the ones in this book. When they ask me for a new collection or novel, you'll frequently hear these authors named. My bookshelves

are filled with their titles, and I'll be reading them all for as long as they continue to publish. I'm honored to be a part of this project, and thanks to the generous support of Diane Goettel at Black Lawrence Press, this bound collection of provocative work is all in one place. I hope these stories stay with you, and that you are as inspired and touched as I was by their words.

Richard Thomas

July 29, 2014

Chicago, Illinois

Parts

Holly Goddard Jones

I had a daughter. When she was eleven, my husband and I took her to Spring Acres, the local pool park, for swimming lessons. She wore a purple bathing suit, the bikini I allowed over Art's grumbled protests, and she bounced on the diving board a little, and leaped, and cannon-balled right into the deep end. The splash of blue-tinted water made a fragile shell around her, gorgeous, and then she went under. She was fearless. There was that moment a mother feels when the heart pauses and the throat goes dry, that fear of—or desire for, maybe—the moment of crisis, when everything changes and you have to change, too, to make sense of it all. That's a strange word: *desire*. But it's there. When your wheels catch water on a rainy day and your brakes are suddenly useless, the pedal under your foot mush; when you're a few swats away from spanking your child too hard, and the coldness in your heart both terrifies and delights you. It's unexplainable, that desire, and perhaps it should also go unacknowledged, but I've since decided that the desire is useful, not

shameful. Because it keeps you sane when the worst happens. And the worst does happen.

I felt that moment, and then she broke the surface of the water, and we caught our breaths together. Art, beside me, never looked up from his medical journal—the luxury of fatherhood.

I like to keep her here: young and alive, so many years away from the horror of that night in the dorm room. Her innocence and mine. She caught her breath that humid July afternoon, and I swear, it was just like the moment of her birth: the intake of air, the shriek of delight and fear. She waved to me from across the water, and I waved back, and we were laughing together. Felicia.

*

She was murdered eight years later, in the fall semester of her sophomore year of college. The boy who killed her, who got away with it, was named Simon Wells, and they'd met a few days earlier at a keg party on State Street. He'd made a pass at her, but she went home that night with his friend instead. The story came out at trial, and the boy she went home with, Marty, was the one who did most of the telling. The police put the rest together. It went something like this: the boys went to Felicia's dorm room—"to see if she wanted to party," Marty said. They smoked pot together, talked for a while, and then Felicia and Marty had fooled around some, kissing and "second base stuff," not wanting to make Simon uncomfortable. "He's a lonely guy," Marty had testified. "I felt sorry for him." After that, Marty claims that Simon "got crazy jealous," pushing him out of the way and forcing himself on Felicia. When she started to scream, Simon covered her mouth for a moment with a pillow—a novelty pillow, rainbow-striped, fish-shaped, that I'd bought for her

myself—and when she screamed again, he covered her face again, and she was dead when he removed it the second time. Or seemed to be, Marty had admitted. She wasn't moving. Didn't seem to be breathing. It had happened so fast—he hadn't known that Simon could hurt her that way, or he would have done something, he would have risked his own life to save her. It had happened so fast.

“Then Simon sent me to get the car started,” Marty said on the stand. “I didn't know what he was going to do. I wasn't thinking too straight by then.”

So many holes in that. So much to doubt. But I want to believe that Marty had told the truth because Felicia had deemed him good, or at least good enough to sleep with. I've spent the five years since Felicia's death trying to reconcile the girl I knew, the daughter I'd made it my life's business to love, with the secrets that reveal themselves in death. You either make allowances or you lose the person a second time, and that's just the way of things.

When Marty left the dorm room, Simon set about covering up his crime. He sprayed Felicia down with a can of air freshener, wove a comforter around the room's two sprinklers, closed the windows and locked them. He tossed the emptied can on the bed, good as a bomb, and then he lit a match, set her on fire, and ran out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him. The doors at Keough Hall are solid oak, and they lock automatically. The first campus police officer to arrive after the fire alarm sounded secured the perimeter but didn't open Felicia's door. He waited for the fire department to arrive, and by the time they were able to break in, the room was a black and steaming husk, and Felicia, who shouldn't have still been breathing, was.

In another lifetime—the life before my marriage and even my courtship, the life before motherhood, when I still had interests

and ambitions and hopes that existed outside of my daughter—I was an English major at a good university. And as every English major must, I took a survey on Shakespeare, whom I regarded with a kind of automatic, passionless appreciation. It was all too big for me, too grand, the fall of kings and death of lovers and old men raising their fists against thunderstorms and God. I believed in Shakespeare's goodness the way I believed in God's goodness: hypothetically, trusting the opinions of the majority over my own disinterest. I hadn't known any tragedy in those days. I had no real reasons for faith or for doubt.

The play I liked that semester was the one I wasn't supposed to like, *Titus Andronicus*. The professor presented it to us as a curiosity and sometimes as a joke. "Shakespeare does *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," he'd said, affecting seriousness. He would read passages aloud with a melodramatic warble, working us like a stand-up comic, sounding, I would think later, almost desperate, as if the only way to excuse the play, to restore Shakespeare for us, was to shout the disdain that he'd rather keep private. What bothered me was that the play affected me more deeply than I could admit during final examinations, when I dutifully penned into my bluebook that it was "easily dismissible, though noteworthy as a testing ground for themes Shakespeare would later put to better use." Here is the sketch of things: There is a great Roman general, Titus, who gets on the wrong side of a powerful woman named Tamora, who becomes Empress. Titus has many sons, and most of them die during the play, but the important thing for you to know is that he has a daughter, Lavinia. Lavinia is raped by Tamora's sons, who then cut out her tongue and cut off her hands so that she can't tell anyone who'd committed the crime. Lavinia doesn't die, but she spends the rest of the play miming and

weeping silently, and then Titus himself slays her at the end, along with a stage full of others.

That was the image I couldn't shake: Lavinia, led onstage by her torturers, robbed of her tongue and her hands. The outrageousness of it. The cruelty.

I hadn't thought about that play in my daughter's lifetime, all those good years of health and plenty. I'd had no reason to. We were, as families go, successful. When Felicia chose the local state college over Vanderbilt, Art's and my alma mater, Art had grouched—but he wrote the tuition and housing checks without so much as a blink, and he drove the half-hour to campus at least once a week for a surprise visit, which she nearly always welcomed. She was a good girl. She'd loved her father. And Felicia, the mere fact of her existence, had continually fixed anything that threatened to break between Art and me. We were better together, united in loving her, than we could have been apart. It wasn't a perfect life, but I can look back on it now and know that it was as close to one as Art and I had deserved.

Then it was gone. Suddenly I was sitting at her bedside, listening to the hitch and hiss of the respirator, backing away every few moments to allow the doctors and nurses to change the bedding, which she frequently wet—the fluids poured out of her as quickly as they were pumped in by IV—and her dressings, which served as her skin. She was so swollen and bandaged that she was unknowable, her dark blonde hair burned almost completely away, the wisps clinging to her forehead as brittle and dark as curlicues of graphite. The room's heat was cranked up as high as it would go, almost 100 degrees, because—an irony, one of so many—her scorched skin couldn't retain any heat. The doctors and nurses wore hand towels around their necks. Art was stripped down to his sleeveless undershirt.

I passed out at one point, came to in a room down the hall, and vowed that I would never be so weak again, that I wouldn't leave her. I returned to find Art pacing the hallway outside her door, rubbing his face briskly with both hands. He'd been crying. Of course we both had. But I could tell he was upset about something new.

"They're going to amputate her hands," he said. He wouldn't have known how to soften his words. "She isn't stable enough to go to the operating room, so they're trying to sterilize her room. They're going to work on her right here."

I had stared at him, still lightheaded. It didn't make any sense.

"She can't live like this," he said, his voice high and choked. "It isn't possible. It isn't right."

I didn't know then what Felicia had suffered before the fire. It was six in the morning, about five hours since we'd gotten the call, and we didn't know that she was the victim of anything but an awful accident; it hadn't even occurred to me to wonder. Later that day Marty Stevenson would walk into his 11:30 section of American History fifteen minutes late, stumble on his way to a desk at the back of the room, and erupt into a fit of hysterics, scaring some of his classmates so badly that a handful fled the room, dialing 911 on their cells. That's when the truth, however distorted and partial, started to emerge. By the time the campus police chief came to the hospital to tell me and Art about Marty's confession, Felicia's hands and one of her ears were gone. It had come off into the doctor's hand like overripe fruit.

It was then that I thought of Lavinia. My daughter lay mute in her hospital bed, unaware of what she'd lost during her unconsciousness. She was swollen all over, bandaged into anonymity, her arms lopped and wrapped and strangely dear, resting on her stomach like paws. "You should touch her," a nurse told me, folding back

the thermal blanket at the bottom of the bed. I watched her carefully peel down a stocking, revealing a foot that was peach and smooth and barely blemished, the toenails painted bright blue. Can you see it? That perfect small foot, the round, almost chubby toes, the cheerful, bright nail polish. I took it in my hands, pressed my cheek against it. I kissed each toe, the way I'd done when she was a baby. I whispered into the delicate arch.

Art couldn't do it. Here he was: a man, a father, a doctor. He'd given Felicia his high forehead and his hands. He'd given her his name. But when I backed away from her foot and beckoned him, he pinched his lips together almost prudishly and shook his head: a hard snap, left-right. The way a child refuses vegetables. Disgusted. Frightened. Absolutely determined. And that was when I began to understand that our marriage wouldn't survive this, even if Felicia could. He was already pulling away from her, wishing her dead, wanting to stop her agony and start his grieving. He didn't want to be father to a creature as destroyed and defeated as this one was, but I, in my selfishness, was determined to hang on to every last bit of her, even if she turned to ashes in my embrace. Titus had killed Lavinia because he couldn't bear to see her live with her shame. To me, Art's turning away from his daughter's foot was the harsher act, because it was rooted not in love, or in selfishness, but in weakness.

Felicia died three days later.

*

You know more than any mother should know, Art told me in the weeks after her death.

And he was right. I worked part-time at the library, a job I'd picked up after Felicia went to college, and I'd spend slow mornings

on the public computer doing searches on the Internet, reading articles in the newspaper, scanning the blogs. *Simon is creepy, I know him from class, he totally did it*, I read on one page and felt the bitter thrill of absolute surety. *It's so sad but she fucked them both and this is the kind of shit that happens*, I read on another, and the thrill turned to fury and shame, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that I, too, could have been a murderer if I'd known who so thoughtlessly and cowardly posted that. I was breaking down, my sleeping hours only distinguishable from the waking hours by my dreams, which made my grief somehow more articulate. Over and over again, Felicia jumped into the swimming pool at Spring Acres. Over and over again, she failed to resurface. And the dream-me would think, looking at the still water, that it would be wrong to jump in after her because water puts out fires. That's when I'd usually wake up.

This is the kind of shit that happens. I started searching her bedroom, going through the items she'd left behind after moving into the dorms: the cheap jewelry box with the little spinning ballerina inside it, her Cabbage Patch doll with the yarn hair, the band posters she'd put up during high school. I looked under her mattress. I pushed aside clean underwear and balled-up socks, finding only a lavender sachet and a cracked plastic egg, the kind pantyhose used to come in, with a single stocking inside, twisted like a dead thing. She'd taken her secret self to college, and the artifacts of that life went up in flames with her. I was left with dolls and old yearbooks and the clothes I'd purchased for her, the life I'd allowed her while she lived under my roof, the remnants of a Felicia I had known and understood.

I'm good at finding that dark matter in the white space, and I'm maybe too good at living there, wallowing in it. I think things

I shouldn't think: that Felicia awakened after the fire started and screamed for me; that Simon and Marty laughed when they reunited at the car, high-fived and lit cigarettes with the same lighter, or book of matches, that had started the fire. I wonder about the times Art was with her alone, when she was a child. Had he hit her? Had he touched her? Art is a decent man, and he wouldn't have done either of those things, but some nights—when the last of the wine is gone and I can feel Felicia all around me, through me, even, like my pulse—everything I should know for sure doesn't seem so certain anymore, and I think about calling Art, at his new house across town, where he sleeps next to his new wife: Did you love her? Did you love me?

*

He just wanted to move on, Art told me as I was packing my suitcases on the day I left; he wanted to remember what happiness felt like. I wasn't thinking then: where I'd go, how I'd pay for it. And I should have felt *something* when he handed me that stack of crisp twenties—everything in his wallet—with assurances that I could also go on using the credit card for as long as I needed. Something other than embarrassment, or gratefulness; it was my money too. But I took what he gave me and tucked it into my purse, and I murmured something like *thanks* in a voice I didn't recognize.

"Don't mention it," he said, leaning over to pick up my bags for me. The bigger person, the big man. Our daughter had been dead for five months, and the trial hadn't started yet. "Where will you go?"

I didn't know. My parents were both dead, and my sister lived in Ohio. I had friends in town—women who resembled friends, at least—but most were also hospital wives, and few were good for more than the occasional light lunch at the country club. When Felicia

died, none of them called me, but they all sent flower arrangements: gigantic bouquets that collectively cost more than my first car had. “A hotel, I guess.”

“Take a room at the Washington House,” he said. “I’d feel more at ease.”

I nodded.

He put the bags back down and came forward, then put his arms around me. I let him. I tried to hold myself stiff at first, but I needed his touch—Christ, I always had—and he melted me, that silly old phrase I hate, the stuff of Hallmark cards and easy listening love songs.

“You don’t have to leave,” he said.

I inhaled the good smell of his neck, the Old Spice he still wore because his father always had. There were reasons for loving him, I know that even now.

“I’ll call tomorrow,” I said into his neck.

He backed away and picked my bags up again. Gentlemanly to the last, but I should have recognized how easy my leaving was—too easy. Twenty-two year marriages don’t end like this, I thought as he loaded the car and kissed me, as I turned over the engine and pulled out of our drive. They don’t simply flat-line. Not if there was life in them to start with.

*

He’s a gynecologist, one of only two who still practice in Roma, which has a history of attracting the doctors fleeing malpractice suits and driving away the ones with real skill. But Art, who could have had a more glittery life than the one he chose, is good. Very good. His clients are loyal, all ages, and even now, the divorce four

years done, one will approach me occasionally, recognizing me from the old family portrait he still keeps in his office. Crazy, but true. And she'll say, "What a good, good man he is. So understanding." I usually nod and agree and leave it at that. There are all kinds of understanding, I could tell her—all kinds of goodness—but what would it matter?

We both agreed, from the start of the marriage, that I'd be better off seeing another doctor, when the need arose. Another decision that came perhaps too easily, but it worked for us. When Felicia was sixteen, and she approached me about birth control, I took her to my doctor in Bowling Green—quietly—to get her examination and prescription. Art and I could function like that when she was still around, with these compact lives that were separate and whole and in no way intersecting. In mine: Felicia's sex life, which I considered myself *with it* enough to understand and even support a bit; my housekeeping and little trivial errands and my books, devoured more often than not with a glass or two of wine. In his: the monthly trips to Nashville with Beau Markham and Robert Zipes, the anesthesiologist and the surgeon—business trips, he called them, though we both knew that I knew better. I'd accepted that they probably played golf and drank to drunkenness; and perhaps they'd gone to strip clubs, too, though I never considered, or allowed myself to consider, the degrees of betrayal beyond that.

His work was in that life, too. One evening at dinner, when Felicia was an eight-year-old playing over at a neighbor's house, a question—perhaps the most obvious question—occurred to me for the first time, and I put down my salad fork, the look on my face apparently bizarre enough that Art paused mid-sentence. "Do you ever get aroused at work?" I said.

“No,” he told me, mildly enough that I believed him. In bed that night, though—at least an hour or more after I had slipped off into sleep—he shook my shoulder. “Every now and then,” he whispered, and I knew what he was talking about right away. “Once in a blue moon. And it shocks me.”

“When does it happen?”

I turned around but couldn’t see his face because his back was to the window, casting him in shadow.

“Sometimes during a breast exam. Most of the time just before the exam starts, and I can see a slice of her skin where the paper jacket gapes open.”

“What about when you—” I couldn’t finish.

“Do a pelvic?” His shadow shook. “Never. I may as well be kneading bread dough.”

My stomach lurched. “Jesus.”

“You think I’m some kind of pervert, don’t you?” he said.

“No,” I told him. I think that I meant it.

“Because it’s common enough.” He rolled onto his back and sighed. “It’s a big joke in med school. But it happens less and less with time, anyway.”

“You get used to it,” I said.

“Something like that.”

I pulled the covers tighter around me. “Do you worry about my doctor?” I asked him.

He was yawning. “Huh?”

“Dr. Nickell,” I said. “Do you worry he’s getting a boner when he touches my boob?”

“No,” Art said, laughing. “It’s real rare, hon. Ninety-nine percent of the time they’re just parts to us.”

“Parts,” I said.

He patted my arm. “Yeah. Like Picasso: a breast here, a leg there. When you get hard, it usually doesn’t even make sense. It doesn’t have to be a beautiful woman or even a young one, just someone who hits your senses the right way.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said.

“I like your parts,” he told me, pulling the waistband of my pajama bottoms down so that he could slip his hand between my legs. He moved against me. “This,” he said lowly. “This is what does it for me.”

Bread dough, I kept thinking. But we had sex anyway.

*

I knew when Art called three weeks ago that he had news for me, probably bad. He only calls for moments like these, and he always prefaces his announcements with, “I wanted you to know first.” Like it’s a gift he’s offering me, a neat little package of despair: *Dana, I’m selling the house. Dana, I met a woman. Dana, we’re getting married.*

“Dana, Stephanie’s pregnant,” he said. “We’re having a baby.”

All I could make clear was this: Felicia would be twenty-four. While Art blathered on, that thought cycled in my head, first in words, then in images: the graduation she never attended, the boyfriend—the *one*—she never met, never had a chance to bring home. Some days I wonder if my life would be different—how my life would be different—if Felicia had been in a car accident, or had cancer, if she’d gone some way that wasn’t so goddamned grotesque. Can you quantify hurt?

“She’s about midway through her second trimester,” Art said, and that snapped me back in a hurry. Stephanie. She works at the

Chamber of Commerce, and I always see her picture in the local paper: cutting a ribbon at some new business nobody wants to see in this town—Blockbuster or Burger King, nonsense like that—hosting a Rotary luncheon, “kicking up her heels”—the *News Leader’s* words—at the Tobacco Festival Street Dance and Tamale Hour. She’s thirty-five, and though those twelve years between us burn sometimes, I’m thankful that he didn’t choose someone Felicia’s age. He could have, too. He’s more attractive now than he ever was: tan, fit, the kind of man who wears his middle age like a Rolex, a sign of his good breeding and achievement. I carry my middle age around like an ulcer. “Twenty weeks or so,” he finished.

“Pretty far along,” was all I said.

“Well, she’s starting to show.” I could hear the television behind his words, and a sound like cabinets opening and closing, dishes being removed and stacked. I pictured Stephanie, apron tied neatly around her cute little pregnant bump, starting supper, giving Art concerned looks, marital shorthand: *Is she okay? Is she flipping out? Do you want one porkchop or two?* “But we wanted to keep it quiet for a while, make sure everything looks good. We’re not in our twenties.”

“You had an amnio,” I said, knowing as I said it I was right. No Down’s baby for Art.

“Well, sure.” He cleared his throat.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“I’d like her to know you,” he said. “And so would Stephanie. We’d like you to be involved, I mean.”

“A girl, then.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing my tear ducts to behave. I thought about the Art in Felicia’s face: her blue, wide-set eyes, her high forehead. And Art’s hands, too: long, graceful fingers that she’d applied toward no particular talent or vocation,

surgery or piano-playing or any of the old clichés. When she was a little girl, and my hair was still long—down to my waist, almost—she'd loved brushing it with my big wooden paddle brush, long strokes that lulled her toward nap-time better than rocking or warm milk ever had. With Art gone to work, we'd lie in the big master bed together, drowsing, and sometimes she'd reach over and pat my face with her still-chubby little fingers: *Mama*, she'd say. Like a blessing.

“Yep, a little girl,” Art told me.

“Why do you think I'd want to know your child, Art?” I said. “I mean, did it cross your mind that the situation might be a little awkward for all of us?”

“Because she's Felicia's sister,” he said.

That's the thing about Art right there: how on the one hand he can be so *good*—so damned noble, even—and on the other, a monster. Who would I be to this child? Aunt Dana? The babysitter?

“I don't think it's a good idea,” I said.

In the background on his end of the line, a hot cooking sizzle—supper almost done. My own stomach, unbelievably, growled; I decided that I'd drive down to Hardee's for a burger, bring it home and eat it with one—or a few—glasses of the good red wine that I bring back from my occasional trips to Nashville. I've gained about twenty pounds since Felicia's death, and when my I saw my sister last Christmas, she had the audacity to tell me that I was “hiding from men”—as though my greatest trouble after the death of my daughter was figuring out how to date again. As if a man were any sort of solution.

“It's an open offer,” Art said. “Indefinitely, okay?”

We said our goodbyes and hung up. Indefinitely: the word almost made me smile. This offer of his—made to assuage his guilt about an old wife, an old *life*—would be forgotten in a few weeks,

dead as Felicia. There would be baby showers and first kicks, a nursery to decorate, cigars—the good Cubans—to ship in and pass among his friends. I would see his child only by accident, and probably more often than I'd like: Roma's a small town. In a few years she would start coming to the library, and when I'd lead Story Hour or one of the Summer Reading Program sessions, maybe she would be one of the small faces looking up at me. Maybe? Christ, it was likely. There was only one library, and if he was as demanding a father as he used to be—he'd wanted Felicia to be every bit as driven and successful as himself, though he'd regarded my own modest smarts, my own lack of worldly ambition, as natural—Art would have her there. Come hell or high water.

I dug my car keys out the basket I keep by the back door, pulled my light jacket off a hook, and checked my purse for cash: eight dollars. I wouldn't be gone long. At Art's house, they would be sitting down to eat dinner, the relief palpable between them, perhaps even confessed out loud: "Thank God we have each other."

*

I will never have another child. This is a truth I settled with long ago, because I was forty-two when Felicia died, and by the time the idea of a new baby presented itself as a kind of solution—*yes, I could just have another*—Art was gone, and my own body was changing, going bad on me the way a woman's body will inevitably do. I'm not a modern woman the way my daughter was: Felicia, whose confident sexuality had fascinated and even impressed me a little, naive as I had been at her age; who saw college as a step in a logical progression; who'd never taken for granted that she could choose her own path in life, take her time, treat dating as recreation and not husband-

hunting. I'm not a modern woman, but I can't help raging a little at the unfairness of the situation—Art's ability to simply move on, to replace our daughter with a new child as easily as he'd replaced our old Toyota Camry with a Cadillac Escalade. Upgrading. I find myself thinking more and more of that day when I left him: I'd thought that I was leaving him, that I'd taken decisive action, but I see now that Art ushered me out the marriage just as he ushered me out of the house that afternoon.

Some nights, all of the things I know for sure—should be able to count on, like gravity and oxygen and sunrise—lose their power over me. I know who killed Felicia. I caught his eye a half-dozen times in the courtroom and simply understood, felt the guilt baking off of him like a fever, settling on me sick and damp and poisoned. I know that much. But some nights, it's Art I want to see destroyed, see broken. I want him to feel at least as bad as I do now, to know loneliness—a woman's loneliness, the way it feels to be childless and manless with nothing else to define you or drive you.

We met when we were in college at Vanderbilt. I was a sophomore, Art just starting his first year in med school. And the first time we had sex—my first time ever—was in my dorm room, when my roommate was gone for the weekend, visiting family. We locked the outer door, turned the radio up loud, so no one in the hallway could hear. I don't remember what was playing, but I remember the scratchiness of the sound, and of my blankets; the coolness of the concrete block wall that my left arm kept brushing as we kissed, the bed was so small. There was the usual pain and blood, and when he finished I cried, because I felt trashy, because I wondered what my daddy would think. My daddy, who'd sold off twenty acres of good farmland to make up the costs that my scholarship didn't cover.

Sex is always violent. Even consensual sex, or *lovemaking* as the hospital wives would always put it, prudish and vulgar all at once. I'm not saying that I hated sex—I didn't—or that Art was somehow rougher than other men, because he wasn't really rough at all. That night in my dorm, when I started to cry, he held me close, patted my hair, whispered in my ear that we never had to do it again if I didn't want. What happened to Felicia, the way our marriage disintegrated: none of that takes away from his essential decency, as much as I sometimes want it to. I don't know if Art is a good man, but sometimes a decent one is all you can hope for.

*

Two days after Art's phone call, I got in my car to drive to Felicia's grave and ended up in Bowling Green instead, sitting in front of the Wells Brothers Furniture Company. Simon's car—a newer black Corvette than the one I'd seen him enter and exit a half-dozen times during Felicia's trial—was parked on the store's side lot, angled across two spaces so that the doors wouldn't get dinged. He'd done that at the courthouse, too, and on the hottest days—this would have been late July—he'd prop a metallic visor up in the windshield. I could often see it in the lot from the courtroom: a wink of light in the distance, like a faraway ocean or a mirage.

His trial lasted two weeks, and the jury deliberations lasted two and a half hours: acquittal on all nine counts. No physical evidence linked him to Felicia's room, which was scorched, then flooded when the sprinkler system finally engaged—no sperm, no fingerprints, no sign of him on the Keough Hall security tapes, though the girl helming the front desk admitted that it wouldn't be hard to sneak by her—and the investigation got botched by a team of campus investigators

who'd never handled anything more complex than noise violations, DUIs, and the occasional stolen bike or book bag. Simon cried alibi as soon as the police dragged him off, but the campus detective began interrogating him without investigating it, a point the defense hammered over and over again at trial. He was at his mother and father's house, his father said on the stand—definitely home at three a.m., when the dorm's fire alarm went off. Everyone was awake, his father insisted: a happy family sitting at the table, having a middle-of-the-night heart-to-heart about Simon's career anxieties. He was, after all, a 23-year-old college sophomore positioned to inherit a regional furniture chain of more than thirty stores.

His friend, Marty, is in prison. He pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter a year before the trial in exchange for a recommended sentence of twenty to life. His testimony was supposed to cinch Simon's conviction, but he ended up doing more harm than good: Simon's slick defense attorneys pinned Marty on a handful of piddling inconsistencies in his testimony, confused him on the stand, made him look like a fool and a liar. I don't feel sorry for him. But the hate, which has become so much a presence in my life that I may as well call it a part of myself, like my eyes or my hands, is for Simon. A useless sort of hate, though, one that I haven't the courage or even ambition to hone into a weapon. But I like the idea of revenge—big revenge, the kind Shakespeare wrote about. In *Titus Andronicus*, Titus kills his daughters' rapists and serves them to their mother in a meat pie. Crude, silly—that's what my professor had told us, anyway. But satisfying, too. We live, I've heard, in a civilized country, in a civilized time. Our movies are violent but our laws are just. The system will serve us. And I put faith in that, because I'm a middle-aged woman, most of my life a homemaker,

and I couldn't even bring myself to give Felicia spankings when she deserved them. What was I supposed to do when the system failed me? What, if not destroy what was left of my own life instead of my daughter's murderers?

I knew that Simon worked the flagship store most evenings. He was on Bowling Green's local news less than a year ago, red Wells Brothers polo tucked into neatly pressed khakis, hair streaked blond but still trimmed short: a solid, All-American male. The segment showed clips of him unloading stock next to his dad, muscles well-defined as he lifted plastic-wrapped couches and recliners from the back of a semi; in another shot, he counted out change for a customer, and said, in a lull between the reporter's voiceover, "You have a nice day, now." The interview was sympathetic. The reporter mentioned that Simon's car had been vandalized, that he was accosted one night outside a bar. "I'm just trying to lead a good life and put this behind me," Simon had said. "I don't bear any grudges." The goddamn nerve.

I'd never gone inside Wells Brothers, even before Felicia's death. They didn't carry the kind of furniture I would have put in my home—not then, at least, when I was still a doctor's wife. I'd driven by once before Felicia started college, thinking that I might find a cheap bookshelf small enough to fit in her dorm room. They were closed, though, and I ended up buying one at Target instead.

I went inside. The showroom smelled cool and plastic, not rich with the earthiness of hard woods and leather. Theirs was the cheap stuff, just short of disposable: pressboard entertainment cabinets and laminated kitchen tables, overstuffed vinyl recliners in burgundy, green, and brown. Ceramic vases and lamps cluttered glass-topped end tables, the vases filled with dusty stalks of eucalyptus, that medicinal scent I've always hated, like cut grass and anise.

It was early evening on a Wednesday and quiet; a couple was on the far end of the showroom looking at the dining room tables, but the store was empty otherwise. The furniture was arranged into little areas meant to mimic rooms in a house: couches with chairs and coffee tables, kitchen tables set for dinner with placemats and plates. I wondered if Simon had designed some of these arrangements and knew that he must have. It was fitting: this man who understood nothing about the fragile construction of a family, piecing together bad fictions out of bad furniture.

The double doors between the stockroom and showroom swung open, and Simon came out. He saw me, started toward me.

I stood where I was and waited for the step that would bring him close enough to feel suspicion, then the step that would make him certain: I waited for him to understand that the mother of the girl he killed was finally confronting him, doing the thing she'd been too scared and weak to do during the trial. So many days I'd sat in that courtroom, Art next to me but careful not to let his arm or leg brush mine, watching this young man pass in his crisp, navy blue suit. So many times I'd caught his gaze, seen something inside him that I knew his own parents had been able to deny, or ignore: the combination of weakness and meanness, self-hatred and vanity. I'd known better than even Simon what a dangerous mixture those traits were, how they could—in the wrong circumstances—drive an otherwise average boy to commit the act of a psychotic. I knew all of that, but I couldn't do anything about it.

He stopped, less than a yard away. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

We made eye contact. I waited. In a moment, I was sure, he'd react: his body would become tense or his hand would start trembling; he'd say something like, "Why are you here?" or "I swear, I

didn't do it." I had envisioned this meeting a thousand different times and ways—considered the dialogue that would follow—but this was the part I had always accepted as a given: he'd see me and he'd *know*.

"Ma'am?" he said. He rubbed the back of his neck, and I noticed for the first time how much fuller his face was now, three years after the trial—a detail that hadn't come through over the television. I could see that he was anxious, but only because he was confronted with a situation he didn't immediately know how to handle. Humor the crazy woman? Call the guys in the little white coats?

I looked at the floor. "I'm browsing," I said.

"Oh, okay." He nodded. "Make yourself at home, just holler if you need anything. We'll be running a special on Leatherlook through Memorial Day, so keep that in mind."

"I will," I said.

He backed away, smiling carefully. Before he turned—before he struck out across the showroom floor toward the couple in the dining area—I thought I saw something in his face. I went back to my car knowing that I was probably kidding myself, that *my* face meant no more to him than Felicia's life had. He'd moved on, like everyone else. Everyone but me.

I think that there are moments in a life when you have to leave a part of yourself behind to function—like molting. Felicia's birth was the first such moment for me: in the weeks after my labor I understood that my body wasn't the only thing that would always be different, that my soul had changed, too. Some loss there, but the gains were greater. When she died, I had to molt again, but I did it badly, and never really finished the job, because I get up mornings feeling like a mother, still, and I go to bed nights mourning my daughter all over again. If the anger is a part of me, Felicia's loss is

a kind of amputation, and I haven't yet figured out how to function without her.

I left Simon's store that night understanding what a small thing a life is—how quickly it comes and goes, how even the bereaved, like my ex-husband, can evolve and adapt and find new ways to get by. I drove home thinking about Art's baby. Intoxicating to imagine this new child, this sister of Felicia's. She is a miracle and a curse: half of Art and none of me.

*

The library is never a loud place, but its energy changes. During the spring, before the middle school lets out and all of the buses begin their afternoon run, the light falls through the windows differently and the books almost seem to sigh, scattering dust particles around in swirls. I sit at the front desk reading a novel or magazine, and the big grandfather clock in the front entrance—the one the city purchased the year of Roma's bicentennial—counts off the new hour with low, spring-like thrums, a brassy, ancient sound. We don't have the world's oldest or most charming building. They made a lot of "improvements" in the 80's: dropped the ceiling, installed cold fluorescent lighting. Five years ago they covered the hardwood floors with wall-to-wall blue Berber carpeting—to minimize noise and retain the heat, the head librarian, Nita, said, but now the children's sneakers smack against the nubby plastic runners that criss-cross the floor at all angles, and I get tripped up at least once a day. A graying woman in cardigan sweaters and khaki skirts and neat leather loafers: the stereotypical old maid librarian, or getting there.

Yesterday, Stephanie arrived in that silent hour before the afternoon rush. Soon, the girls and boys would tear in, and as oddly

respectful as they are in this place—the only place besides church, perhaps, that holds such sway over a child—the very walls vibrate when they're here. Until they start to drift off home for dinner, I'm captivated, and that short period of my day is when I can leave Felicia behind me for a little while. I love watching them sit at the tables, kicking their heels against the chair rungs, chins tucked into palms. They turn the pages of books so carefully, the little ones.

That silence right before is when I'm at my most vulnerable. It's physical—the emptiness around me, and within me, a kind of husked out, cried out place that's almost a pleasure because it's numb. And that's how Stephanie found me: sitting in my familiar chair with the worn-in seat cushion, printing a pile of overdue slips for mailing, sleeping with my eyes open.

"I hoped you'd be here," she said.

What do you say about a woman like Stephanie? She's attractive, but I was more attractive at 35; smart—that much is obvious by speaking to her—but not especially deep or sensitive, not *soulful*, which is what Art used to say he loved about me: *How much you care about everything. How you feel so much, all the time.* Polite, not necessarily kind. She is the woman who marries men like Art, who is able to understand, with a savvy that borders on calculation, that her modest charms have more value because she's the new model.

But she's also one of those women who seem more real in pregnancy. And it hurt me to see her that way—brown, nicely trimmed hair a bit more mussed than usual; the way her badly cut sailor blouse pulled tight around her middle but sagged under her arms, making her both sad and kind of lovely, too. I could glimpse, for a moment, what a person might love about her, and that was the worst, meanest kind of irony.

“Good to see you,” I said, the lie so obvious and empty that I think we were both embarrassed by it.

“You, too.” She gripped the edge of the front desk before me. Her fingernails were painted a smooth, even coral. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while.”

The library was so quiet. The only patron was an older man—one of those retirees who comes by daily and stays for hours—and he was off in the back corner, tucked away with the paperback mysteries and true crime books. One afternoon, this old man, Jimmy, his name is, stood right where Stephanie was standing, for hours, it seemed like, telling me about one of the books he was reading: *The Red Light Murders*. I let him. The victims were young women, he explained, wannabe starlets and prostitutes living in the bad part of Los Angeles, circa 1925. Killer filleted them like fish, took their eyes for trophies. And the author had proven, through new DNA technologies and old documents found on his family’s country estate, that his own grandfather was the likely murderer. “Helluva thing,” Jimmy had said, tapping the book’s cover. “Just goes to show.” He said that a few times as he talked—*just goes to show*—but he never finished the sentence, never told me *what* it showed, what kind of sense you can find in ugly death.

“How are you?” I said to Stephanie. I found myself motioning toward her stomach and felt ridiculous.

“Good,” she said. I was glad that she didn’t lay her hands of each side of her belly and smile serenely, like women on TV always do—like I had even done on a few occasions during my pregnancy, as if I were carrying around the secrets to the universe: me, the Goddess Mother, the first woman to ever create life. “I’m comfortable right now. My mother keeps telling me that I’ll be suffering come July. And the humidity’s always so bad mid-summer.”

“I wouldn’t worry so much,” I said. “I enjoyed my pregnancy, right up until those last couple of days.”

“Oh, I’m enjoying it,” Stephanie said quickly. “I’m just dreading the heat.”

The grandfather clock chimed the half hour, and my arms broke out in chill-bumps. I wasn’t ready for a sermon from Stephanie, who appeared so full of good intentions that she might’ve been hauling them around instead of Art’s baby. I knew what she was going to say to me, could’ve scripted it out for her on the back of the check-out cards we don’t use anymore but keep around for scrap paper: *This means a lot to Art. Think it over, okay?*

“Stephanie,” I said. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to let you know that I’m with you,” she said. “You know, thinking that you and the baby getting close would be a bad idea. Or weird, at least.”

“Yeah, weird,” I said, nodding. I wasn’t quite processing what she was saying. I looked down at her round middle, how the red bow on the front her blouse drooped, one length of ribbon hanging much lower than the other.

“Art cares a lot. He can’t see too far ahead sometimes, though.”

I nodded again, but only because that’s what she expected. The whole time we were married, Art was *always* looking ahead: to the next car, the next promotion, the next big vacation.

“He’s not thinking of this baby as a person yet.” She touched her stomach then. “He’s just seeing her as this way of getting a little bit of Felicia back. You can’t put that kind of burden on a child. She has her own life to live out.”

“If you’re lucky,” I said. Unfair, probably, but I felt justified when I saw the look on her face: pitying, that look, and so certain. *Not me. Not my baby.* As if reason governs these things, or desire.

“I guess that’s in God’s hands,” she said. I could see that she believed it—believed in this God of hers, his big hands in the sky. Fitting, really. Reduce God to his hands, his parts—big male hands that could hit or hurt on whim: like Simon’s, like Marty’s. Like Art’s, for Christ’s sake, those long, lovely fingers that he gave our daughter, that had touched me on too many nights to count, that had handed me those crisp twenties on a day that now felt like a million years ago. I pictured God as a pair of hands.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I told her.

She adjusted her purse strap and smiled. “He still loves you, Dana. Just like he still loves Felicia. That’s okay, you know? I knew what I was getting into with him. I knew that he came with...” She hesitated.

“What?” I said, waiting for her to say “baggage.” Stephanie looked like the kind of woman who’d spout pop psychology of the Dr. Phil variety.

She shook her head, all that nicely trimmed hair. “Ghosts.”

I didn’t want to cry—not in front of her, not at all. So I kept my face still.

She came around the desk, took my hand, and pressed it to the side of her stomach, where the curve started to recede into the sharp angle of her hipbone. The skin there was tight, dense but yielding, and the intimacy of the touch was infuriating and unfair: a shameful miscalculation, and I think she knew it as soon as she took my hand. I could smell her perfume—something light and floral—and beneath it, a sour note of perspiration. There was a flutter beneath my fingers, so familiar that for a second I couldn’t breathe. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. Outside, the air brakes of a school bus whistled, then hissed. I drew my hand away.

*

Two years ago, a couple of months after marrying Stephanie, Art showed up to my house with a box of Felicia's things, scavenged from his basement, and a bottle of Jim Beam. *I couldn't do this alone*, he told me, and so we went through the items together, trying to decide what to keep and what to give away, realizing that we had to hold on to all of it. We sat side by side on my sofa, and we flipped through the pages of yellowing photo albums, laughing over pictures of ourselves—young, thin, tan before tanning was taboo—crying over pictures of our daughter, taking swigs from the bottle and beginning the business of sleeping together before either of us would have acknowledged the possibility. There was that moment before we decided to go the bedroom when we both knew that everything could change again, and probably for the worse—but desire's a funny thing, the only way you can cope sometimes, and we didn't pause long.

We collided in the dark, clumsy, out of practice; it had been years since we'd touched, and I was conscious of the ways my body had changed since the last time we'd had sex. And when was that? I have no clear memory of a *last time*, just a vague sense that it happened before we got the call about Felicia—days, a couple or a dozen—and that it didn't happen after her death, despite a few half-hearted, disastrous attempts. Art was careful, even reverent. And though I never once harbored hope that he'd come back to me, there was a moment—when he placed his ear to my heart and listened, and I felt it quicken beneath his warmth, traitorous as always—that I believed, despite everything, if I gave enough of myself I could have them back again. That wanting it badly enough could make a difference.