She bought the swans because of the empty pond. Lonely; that’s why, really. She saw two swans in profile in a poultry magazine she’d picked up at the dentist’s. She paid $1500 for a pair. As if swans could change anything. Her husband says she needs birds like she needs a hole in her head. A lobotomy, she thinks, that’s what I need. Every time she stares out the window toward the pond, the empty water makes her cry. She charged the pair on a new credit card that came in the mail that day. What’s the interest on that card? You never read the fine print.

She isn’t the sexiest wife. She’s aware of this. Since the operation he hasn’t touched her. That was three years ago. They’ve the house and the dog and their two grown children who call on birthdays, Christmas.

The swans arrive in a box with holes in it but no instructions on how to care for them. Her husband’s the one to bring the swan box home from the post office. He’s thinking she’s going into the poultry business; perhaps she’s going to sell eggs. Do something with her life. He opens the box and one swan, the male? bites him on his lip. They’ll make a good stew, he yells. Can you eat swan, she wonders. Would he do that? She’s sitting on the floor with the swans flapping about; white, with speckles of pink where the blood dripped. Why not ducks, he says. Ducks cost $20 for a pair. What was she thinking? She’s so impulsive. Water fowl, what the fuck? Return them.

A strict no fowl return policy says the operator. Unless they’re sick. Are they sick? They’re mean. No returns. Is she smirking through the phone? What have I done? I’m just after some beauty. You’re a pain in the ass, he says when she’s off the phone. Get these birds back in the box, back to the post office, and call the credit card company.

Do you still want me, she’d asked three months after the mastectomy. He looked surprised. Those days are over, don’t ya think, he’d said. Let’s just go forward. He pats her like she’s their terrier. He goes out of the room. The shower turns on upstairs.

It’s pointless to have an empty pond. Got to get these swans in the pond. They’re in the living room. How to get them out of her living room? She’d
thought this a good project. She imagines the swans in the pond. No! She sees herself standing at her window looking over at the swans on the pond. But they are devilishly mean. She tries grabbing one by its wings but it squawks and almost bites her. She runs and gets a towel, two towels. Then four more; she throws towels at the swans trying to catch them. Their wings whoosh as they dodge past her, darting from the towels. They can’t fly, that’s something. But they can run fast. All around the sofa she runs, around and around trying to catch first one, then the other. White feathers and swan shit all over the living room. Bits of cloudy down on the walls even. And straw from the shipping box. Strings of straw everywhere. Who knew two swans could make such a mess in so little time? And the male, it’s got to be the male. Obviously. On top of the female. His beak is holding down the female’s head and he’s going at her. She’s lying under him passively. Looking at the male atop the female makes her angry and isn’t her husband coming back to help her? She hears his footsteps at the back of the house. Maybe he’s brought a net? That old butterfly net in the boys’ old bedroom. He’s coming back. He opens the door, looks in. There’s a Band-Aid across his lip. He’s showered and changed. Shakes his head. What a mess! He slams the front door on his way out.

The female swan lets out a scream. Heartbreaking. She puts her hands over her ears. Jesus, what have I done? She stands up and gets a broom. They squawk and flutter and she’s stepping in excrement and it’s imbedding in the hardwood floor cracks. And the smell. She’s nauseated. God damnit you swans, get yourselves into the box—now! But the male’s on top of the female again. She gets a towel and throws it over both. In one fell swoop she has them, grabs them up. They weigh a lot, she almost drops them, feels her lower back stab with pain. She drops the towel and swans in the box and closes the box flaps. But she needs him to come lift this box. The box is ungainly. She’s out of breath. Sweat is pouring down her scarred front; pooling around the elastic of her panties. She grabs two encyclopedias and puts them on top of the box.

She checks the swans hourly. Her husband comes back after midnight. He smells of gin, tangy and ripe. Familiar. She asks, Please take the box out to the pond.

Those stupid swans still here? I thought you were shipping them back. Can’t. Have to keep them. They’re a couple, you know. He owns her. He takes her whenever he wants.

The house stinks, her husband says. So take the swans to the pond and it won’t stink anymore. He frowns at her but picks up the box. She goes to the window and watches. She sees him making his way across the bridge to the pond. He’s struggling with the box. He gets to the pond and kicks the box
over—huge wings span out. He jumps away. The swans waddle to the pond. She can just make out the ghostly outline of them in the water. Tomorrow morning, she thinks, I’ll have a cup of coffee and watch the swans.