that in fact celebrated a past moment’s stubborn resistance to idealization, that coexisted with anhedonia? The twist of these novels, Groff’s most openly among them, is that they aren’t yearning for any belle époque—but they yearn nonetheless. Their nostos is that short moment of open dissolution, not yet needing to be denied, that now feels locked away. Why miss it? Because it was something to be trusted. Being nostalgic for it is a way of recognizing that it now seems too much to ask. +

MARGIE DOHERTY

Cool Confessions


“THERE ARE ALSO MEN IN THE WORLD,” LYDIA Davis reminds us. As if we could forget. But sometimes we do,

and think there are only women—endless hills and plains of unresisting women. We make little jokes and comfort each other and our lives pass quickly. But every now and then, it is true, a man rises unexpectedly in our midst like a pine tree, and looks savagely at us, and sends us hobbling away in great floods to hide in the caves and gullies until he is gone.

This is the story “Men” in its entirety. One of 122 entries in Davis’s most recent collection, Can’t and Won’t, it’s an archetypal Davis story. Brief and cryptic, like a riddle or joke, it breaks whatever rules of American short-story writing one might have internalized in school. There’s no pithy, sentimental gut-punch (“baby shoes, never worn”); no laborious characterization. The humor is dry but warm, and the mind behind it steely but conspicuously sensitive. And as Davis’s stories have since her very first collection, which was published at the height of feminism’s second wave, “Men” draws its emotional heft from what it means to think, and to feel, as a woman. Davis, now 67, has come to publish stories that reflect the mature themes of a mature life: the indignities of aging; the deaths of friends and family; the insufficiency of words, spoken or written, for coping with loss—undercurrents of Varieties of Disturbance (2007) that also course through Can’t and Won’t. But the relationship between men and women—and between women, about men—continues to be central to her work.

“Men” is a strange little story, and more complex than it looks. A wry illustration of the delicate solidarity between women, the story, in fact, never tells. In this odd gendered landscape, there are unresisting women, the occasional man, and a “we”; perhaps this “we,” who scatters at the sight of a pine, consists not of women, but of universal creatures, outside of sex and its alliances? Perhaps, but probably not. “Men” is a minatory fable, with its floods and caves and gullies, but Davis cares too little for morals, and too much for a specific kind of man and woman, to be a fabulist. She is drawn to women like herself and the men they love—hopelessly straight, educated, and anxious women, and the evasive love-objects whose absence is a void they fill with obsessive contemplation.

Most often, Davis’s narrators apply these sharp analytic minds to their own internal states, to thoughts and feelings that elude reasoned explanation. Her women suffer from heartbreak more often than from hunger pangs; they rarely discuss the politics of the day. We might think such fiction wouldn’t tell us much about revolution, except of the
Davis was not always so forthcoming. Early in her career, she was more like one of her hobbling women, hiding behind abstraction and anonymity. “Men” calls to mind a story from The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories (1976), a collection filled largely with impersonal parables. “Women,” also only a few sentences long, opens on a satirical note: “Men are always slightly more intelligent than women.” A series of observations follows: Men are afraid of intelligent women and avoid them. Other women “think they are lesbians” and are “frightened off.” “Thus these women are truly alone, but for the occasional man or woman attracted to their iron wills.” Somehow this sentence is too solemn to be dismissed along with the other observations. The phrase “iron wills” sticks out, as if designed to resonate with readers experiencing a similar kind of solitude.

“Women” is part of a collection filled with silent, stony women. (Another story describes a girl who actually turns to stone.) Almost every female character is ignored, overlooked, and hushed. “The Universal Lady” sums up her trial in brief: “There once was a woman. But was she really there, or was she perhaps some place else at the same time?” This mysterious woman—maybe a “young girl,” or maybe an “old hag”—may not even be real. Her universality makes sense: What woman hasn’t marveled at the way she can move through the world while remaining unheard, unseen?

Davis herself was largely unheard during this early phase of her career. She published her first three books of fiction with independent presses; they garnered a grand total of two reviews. She didn’t attract real attention until she took the bold step of making her parables personal. Break It Down (1986), her first collection with a major press, presented a first-person narrator who seemed to have much in common with the book’s author. She is a woman writer and translator in the process of separating from her husband. (Davis married the novelist Paul Auster in 1974, with whom she had a son; they divorced in 1978.) Stories like “Our Therapy” and “Visit to Her Husband” present this woman’s pain in greater specificity—not any therapy but “our” therapy, not any husband but hers.

Davis’s main innovation in Break It Down was to use a cool, analytical style in her most personal stories, a show-don’t-tell neutrality that simultaneously named and disclaimed emotional experience with a palpable origin in the author’s life. “Story,” the collection’s opener, plays out a growing conflict in a romantic relationship. The narrator, a writer and translator who lives alone, suspects that her lover lies to her. Each thought or action is presented sequentially, in direct sentences with little description or elaboration. “I write a note, read it over, write a new note, and stick it in his door.” The narrator writes about the conflict to distance herself from it: “I try to figure it out,” she writes. Near the story’s end, she considers that “maybe the truth does not matter,” but I want to know it if only so that I can come to some conclusions about such questions as:
whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, then how much; whether he loves me or not; how much; how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling.

The entire story hinges on that “if only,” minimizing distress even while presenting it in plain and excruciating terms. The sentence is balanced, the tone measured, the affair’s costs and consequences identified and enumerated. This is a cool confession, in which the rigor of form controls unruly feeling, and, in straining to do so, shows just how much is felt.

For Davis, the intelligent mind that can break it down — that can observe and collate and analyze — might be the very same mind that is breaking down. In “Five Signs of Disturbance,” the final story in the collection, a woman considers how intelligence can be the province of the most damaged:

In spite of being drunk, she can still hold on to some things in her mind, though with an effort. She sees how well she is holding on to things and thinks that she is still smart. She thinks about how her smartness doesn’t seem to count for much anymore, the way it used to. Her smartness has counted for less and less as she has grown older. She lies there in the dark trying to pull herself together.

Form makes a noble effort to control feeling, but it can’t control behavior. It can merely trace our dismay when we make the same mistakes again, and again, and again.

The challenge for women writers who came after the crest of the second wave was how to integrate the ideas and experiences made possible by feminism into a sophisticated and rigorous literary style. One answer, taken up by Ann Beattie, Mary Gaitskill,
Lorrie Moore, and, of course, Davis, was a specifically female take on minimalism. Though nothing could be more minimal than a two-sentence story, Davis refused the dirt as well as the realism of “dirty realism.” In the words of one reviewer, she was “Montaigne in a minimalist mood.”

These authors mined some of the same topics as confessional predecessors like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Erica Jong—motherhood, sex, trauma—but their styles veered toward the dispassionate. Beattie, who described her work as “hands-off narrative,” was both celebrated as clinical and condemned as cold. Gaitskill presented disastrous couplings antiseptically, with the bluntness of an autopsy report. Even Moore, the most expressive of the bunch, instructed readers how not to feel sadness at the loss of a boyfriend or a mother, or anxiety about one’s own health. “How to Be an Other Woman,” one of her second-person stories from Self-Help (1985) contains imperatives like “do not pout,” “remain laconic,” and “don’t lose your resolve.”

Rather than turning and burning like Plath’s Lady Lazarus, or whining and wailing like Jong’s Isadora Wing, the women in these stories were cool, controlled, detached. They took stock of their suffering—physical illness, mental breakdowns, BDSM play gone bad—and then, rather than pushing it aside, presented it clearly and without exaggeration. What their fiction did was combine the formal and tonal edicts of 1980s minimalism—brevity, irony, and opacity—with the subject matter of 1960s confessional poetry and the insights of 1970s radical writings. The result was a new and powerful way of talking about female pain.

It took over ten years for reviewers to pick up on the strengths of this new short fiction. Though Beattie was celebrated alongside Raymond Carver in the 1970s (there was even talk of a “Beattie generation”), critics didn’t celebrate these writers as a group until the 1990s. Even then, their writing was celebrated for its artistry, while its political aspects went overlooked. A 1999 review in Harper’s linked Davis with Moore and Amy Hempel based on their “combination of allusiveness, quick symbol, and memoirish tone.” The reviewer carefully distinguished “memoirish” fiction from memoir. These are formally radical writers, he explained, who only write about real-life events in order to undermine the whole idea of autobiography. They’re not confessional, they’re better than that; they’re clever.

But what about women like Jong who claimed that candid, personal writing could spark political change? Can autobiography become art? These were the questions Davis took up in her lone novel, The End of the Story (1995). The book describes the end of a love affair and the difficult process of writing a fictionalized account of it. Loosely structured, it alternates between retrospective scenes from the affair, told in the past tense, and scenes from the narrative present, the time of writing. Readers of Break It Down will recognize certain episodes, cobbled together to fashion something like a plot. Circuitous and intensely self-reflexive, the novel at times resembles the metafiction of male postmodernists—Barth, Barthelme, Gass—who suggested that anything could be a story as long as it was shaped by an expert hand.

But Davis uses the technique toward a different end. By showing how a novel is made, she makes us ask which experiences should be the stuff of art. Her narrator sits in a private workspace, surrounded by old notebooks (which she often fails to decipher) and folders containing different kinds of material for the novel she plans to write:
“MATERIAL TO BE USED,” “MATERIAL NOT YET USED,” “MATERIAL USED OR NOT TO BE USED,” and “MATERIAL.” Though we don’t see this material in its inchoate form, we assume it is about the affair, and that it is emotionally charged and deeply personal. “I would like to write on it MATERIAL READY TO BE USED,” she says about the first box, “but if I do that it may bring me bad luck, because the material may not really be ‘ready.’” It is the narrator, though, who is not really “ready.” Her memory is shaky, her grasp on facts loose. Did they quarrel about this thing or that? she tries to recall. Did her trip East push him away, or was he already leaving? Her explanations are almost always qualified with “I think” or “it seemed.” “I don’t know exactly why things were going wrong just when they were,” she admits, “but a day came that later seemed to be the beginning of everything going so wrong that we couldn’t get it right again.” The syntax twists in an effort to make sense of the story’s arc, the effort here so palpable that we sense that the narrator is writing this story for her own understanding rather than ours. “When I first started working on the novel,” she explains, “I thought I had to keep very close to the facts about certain things. . . . Because I had wanted to write these things for so long, I thought I had to tell the truth about them. But the surprising thing was that after I had written them the way they were, I found I could change them or take them out, as though by writing them once I had satisfied whatever it was I had to satisfy.”

At first, the narrator changes the story by imagining an alter ego. As in “Story,” she experiments with making her writing less personal. She recalls receiving a letter from her ex-lover, a translated poem, and writing back with her interpretation of his action and her feelings about it. She puts these things “in the form of a story because that seemed as impersonal as his poem.”

Over the course of the novel, this desire for impersonality disappears. The first person replaces the third; the narrator stops creating characters (“Laura” and “Hank,” then “Hannah” and “Stefan”) and starts writing about herself. Her first readers suggest she change the names; a friend says “no one can fall in love with someone named Hank,” and her partner objects to the name Stefan “because it was too European.” These are minor quibbles, but they reflect the narrator’s desire to write a work of fiction that readers both enjoy and believe. She models her work after the writers she admires, one for his ability to write a story in which characters only walk in and out of rooms, another for his “high moral tone,” but these efforts at imitation fail. “I don’t have the same strong moral principles,” she confesses.
Eventually, the novel becomes a deliberate metafictional reflection on the writer’s relationship to her protagonist. “At times the novel seems to be a test of myself, both as I was then and as I am now,” she muses.

In the beginning, the woman was not like me, because if she had been, I could not have seen the story clearly. After a while, when I was more used to telling the story, I was able to make the woman more like me. I sometimes think that if there was enough goodness in me then, or enough depth or complexity, this will work, if I can make it work. But if I was simply too shallow or mean-spirited, it will not work, no matter what I do.

Conscious of her potential failures, of character and of craft, the narrator proceeds with personal writing and revises earlier drafts accordingly. The personal, briefly held at bay, comes crashing in.

The narrator’s partner, Vincent, a literary man, has doubts about her work-in-progress. He’s been skeptical since the beginning, in part because he knows the subject matter, and “he tends to regard all the love affairs in my life as having been sordid.” We learn that his objections don’t stem from jealousy—he knows all about her past lovers—but rather from his inflexible standards for art. “Vincent sits there in a flowered armchair in our living room and winces at the thought that I might put anything sentimental or romantic in the novel.” He suggests she leave out “any intimate scenes,” as well as any moments that show a woman’s weakness. “But I suspect he thinks I should also leave out my feelings, or most of them,” the narrator reflects.

Although he values feelings in themselves and has many strong feelings of different kinds, they do not particularly interest him as things to be discussed at any length, and he certainly does not think they should be offered as justifications for bad actions. I’m not writing the book to please him, of course, but I respect his ideas, though they are often rather uncompromising. His standards are very high.

The best art, to Vincent’s mind, is nearly bare of sentiment. It resembles the “moral fiction” to which the narrator once aspired. To his mind, a good writer will put feelings in their proper place—away from the center of the story.

Though the protagonist never openly disagrees with this advice, her style of self-narration defies it. She describes, in gross detail, each shameful thought, each repulsive feeling. Her account of a bad night, post-breakup, is unflinching. It’s one of the rare moments when Davis’s diction, often so elegant, even prim, becomes coarse:

The nights were always the worst . . . . It was hard to get into bed and stop moving, and hardest of all to turn off the light and lie still. I could have covered my eyes and put earplugs in my ears, but that would not have helped. Sometimes I wanted to plug up my nostrils, too, and my throat, and my vagina. Bad thoughts came into bed and crowded up against me, bad feelings came in and sat on my chest so that I couldn’t breathe. I would lie on my right side, my bony knees pressing together until they were bruised, the right on top of the left and then, when I turned over, the left on top of the right . . . . I wondered, as though I were far away from all this, what would happen now, if I would eat less and grow thinner, if I would become still more occupied by the thought of him and go to further extremes in trying to make him talk to me and in searching for him.

She does go to further extremes. Her friends find her hard to watch; we find her actions hard to read. She peers into the windows of
her ex-lover’s house and harasses him at the gas station where he works. She dines with other men in public to court his jealousy. She invites him to parties long after they’ve made an end of things. These actions have no effect and no one, not even the reader, is surprised. The narrator’s friend insists on an end to this behavior. “She thought I should have more pride. She would have had more pride.” At this point, the narrator is not eating or sleeping and only rarely working. She’s no longer a person with a body, but merely an obsessive mind.

Sharing shameful things can feel like walking around naked, and perhaps it’s the protagonist’s curiosity about the unvarnished states of others that leads Davis to give us a parade of naked women near the novel’s end. The narrator sits in a health spa bath and marvels at each woman’s body:

In Ellie’s health club, one afternoon, I sat on a tiled step in a bath of warm water and looked at all the different bodies of women around me, of different shapes and proportions. Some had small, flat breasts, and some heavy breasts that hung down their bellies. Some had round, sloping shoulders, and some had straight, bony shoulders. Some had plump, curved backs and square, dimpled buttocks, and some had narrow, straight backs and round buttocks. What surprised me most, about some women, was that the areoles of their nipples were so large and so dark, or so small and so pale as to be nearly invisible, and then, about others, that their pubic hair grew so far up their bellies, or was not dark but blond, or red.

It’s Our Bodies, Ourselves without the warm, sisterly tone. Davis is, as ever, clinically precise, the symmetrical sentences building rhythmically to form a taxonomy of the female sex. It’s a view of women that can only be seen by women, a private showing that Davis makes public.

On one of the very last pages of The End of the Story, Vincent asks the narrator whom she plans to show the draft to. She tells him, and he chides her, “Aren’t you going to show it to any men?” “I added another name to the list,” she says, “because I had not intended to exclude men.”

After the End of the Story, a philosophical curiosity came to replace the confessional voice. Some stories resembled games or thought experiments. Characters rarely had histories or names. It became harder to know who the speakers were—what they felt, whom they loved. When Davis probed a feeling, she did so with a rigorous logic that seemed to promise resolution, if not now then soon. Painful episodes happened almost entirely offstage, often without much commentary. The chatty narrators of her later work are not the silent women of her earliest stories, but they speak in elaborate riddles, in voices not quite theirs.

Almost No Memory (1997) showed how personal stories could be made into impersonal scenarios. “The Outing,” a story about a marital spat, presents action and affect in passive voice—“an outburst,” “a cry of anger”—as if these moments of drama, formerly the center of a story, were stage directions or sound effects, belonging to no one in particular. “Glenn Gould” uses the pianist’s interest in the Mary Tyler Moore Show to justify the fact that the narrator watches the show while she is “home alone with the baby so much.” Even the most moving story about domestic life is highly abstract. “Wife One In Country” relates a woman’s phone call to her ex-husband’s home, where her son is currently staying. She speaks to her ex-husband’s new wife (“Wife Two”), her
son, and then sits down to dine alone. The story ends with her watching a happy family scene on television: “Pain increases in wife one, wife one swallows food, swallows pain, swallows food again, swallows pain again, swallows food again.” We measure the extent of the pain only by the persistent efforts to repress it.

Repression became both theme and formal method in *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001) and *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007). The stories about things that we’d expect would evoke strong feelings, like death and other forms of loss, are instead subduced. In one, a woman chides a funeral parlor for its use of the portmanteau “cremains” (“Letter to a Funeral Parlor”). It’s not until late in the story that we learn the cremains in questions were once the woman’s father. In others, a narrative voice describes grief obliquely, from a formal distance. “Grammar Questions” presents a mind wrestling with the idea of an ill parent’s imminent death. “I won’t know if the words ‘he’ and ‘him’ are correct, in the present tense,” she speculates. “Is he, once he is dead, still ‘he’, and if so, for how long is he still ‘he’?” The narrator here is the Enlightenment’s ideal subject, rational above all else. The story may be poignant, but it’s not exactly personal.

Impersonality paid off in a new quantity, and kind, of critical attention. *The End of the Story* was Davis’s first widely reviewed book. It was well received, and provided reviewers with the chance to return to *Break It Down*. Reviews of both books in the *London Review of Books* and the *TLS* chided British publishers and audiences for failing to pay attention to “Davis’s distinctive voice.” Still, in 2001 a reviewer could still refer to Davis as best known by the “literary cognoscenti.” That began to change when *Samuel Johnson*
meditations and evasions. Reading them produces confusion that is followed quickly by revelation. We feel smarter than the distressed narrators, who are stymied by their own mistakes. But Davis’s achievement in these stories also makes it hard to locate the turbulent minds behind their smooth surfaces. As we study stories like “Grammar Questions,” searching for the pain that lies beneath it, we’re rarely prompted to say, yes, this is what loss feels like. Instead, these stories are what we imagine we might say about loss if we were more stoical about such things. If we were calmer, more rational, and more controlled.

The fantasy of control has always existed alongside Davis’s confessionalism. The difference is that the narrators of the later fiction come closer to realizing this aim. Stories like “Enlightened” and “Head, Heart,” both from Varieties of Disturbance, imagine a moment
when the mind might eradicate unpleasant emotions, though that moment has not yet arrived. “What I Feel,” from Almost No Memory, envisions just such a time. It describes the struggle to become, as a therapist might say, adjusted. “These days I try to tell myself that what I feel is not very important,” it begins. “I’ve read this in several books now: what I feel is important but not the center of everything.” She takes solace in the idea that she’s on the path to a calmer life. “This is a real comfort to me, because if you despair of going on, but at the same time tell yourself that your despair may not be very important, then either you stop despairing or you still despair but at the same time begin to see how your despair, too, might move off to the side, one of many things.” So too might we describe Davis’s development as a writer. The female, heterosexual despair that was so central to the early stories, and is presented so unapologetically in the novel, has moved “off to the side,” one among many things.

With Can’t and Won’t, Davis brings back the confessional style and adds a note of desperation. The older we get, the harder it is to hold feeling at bay. Davis had once imagined old age as a time of easy eccentricity: “She looked forward to being an old woman and wearing strange clothes. . . . It will be so much calmer, she said to Mitchell, because of the lessening of sexual desire” (“What an Old Woman Will Wear,” from Break It Down). But her fiction about old age shatters this fantasy. “When you’re young, you’re usually happy, at least you’re ready to be,” observes the narrator of “The Seals,” the longest story in the new collection. “You get older and see things more clearly and there’s less to be happy about.”

“The Seals” is a diaristic story about a half-sister’s death. Memories of the sister are interspersed with descriptions of seals as seen from a train window. “I miss her so much,” says the narrator, a sentiment she repeats several times over the course of the twenty-six pages. “Maybe you miss someone even more when you can’t figure out what your relationship was. Or when it seemed unfinished.” The story has none of the caginess of “Grammar Questions” or “Letter to a Funeral Parlor,” nor the complexity. Other narrators describe, quite directly, their failures and fears. Some stories are almost artless, so little are their statements shaped into recognizable fictional form. This is Davis at her least censored.

The confessions are not always pleasant. The women in Can’t and Won’t complain endlessly about the smallest things. They grouse about books, about cooks, about fellow travelers, about work and fatigue and time wasted waiting for water to boil (“The Bad Novel,” “The Dreadful Mucamas,” “On the Train,” “I’m Pretty Comfortable, but I Could Be a Little More Comfortable”). They refuse to do domestic work and yell at those who’ve hired them to do it (“The Dreadful Mucamas,” “The Old Vacuum Cleaner Keeps Dying on Her”). They dismiss those who advise them to transcend their emotions, to be more enlightened: “Far from being troubled by their negative emotions . . . they in fact like having negative emotions” (“Negative Emotions”). These are not the scorned lovers or young mothers of earlier stories, writing about the pains of courtship and marriage, trials familiar to us from the most canonical of texts. They are older, cranker, less obviously sexual. They are “willful, brutal women,” or in the words of one story, “difficult” (“In the Gallery”). Iron-willed.

The narrator of “Not Interested” is one such difficult woman, and she refuses to modulate her voice. “I’m simply not interested in reading this book,” the story begins. It escalates from there:
We might laugh at these exclamations, but we do so with considerable discomfort. The brilliance of this particular story—and of the collection more generally—is that it makes us identify with the narrator even as we mock her. The narrator isn’t the only one bored here; we too are bored by her repetitive thoughts, her seemingly endless complaints. We’re not especially interested in the minutiae of her life, or in petty problems that are not presented in entertaining form. Davis’s narrator ignores our boredom and insists on talking about whatever she chooses, in whatever form she likes. And, like stubborn older women, we keep reading, even if we say “Not this again!” upon turning the page and finding more of the same.

These stories, compared with their predecessors, are not difficult—that is to say, formally intricate, erudite, or somehow resistant to reading. Instead they challenge us by forcing us to listen to women we might rather ignore. These women won’t stop shouting about their boredom, irritation, and envy. They are unapologetic about their unappealing emotions, and, unlike the speakers of earlier stories, uninterested in transcending them. The women in Can’t and Won’t, who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, share their frustrations in voices that are too loud and too emotional. Taken together, they form an all-female chorus that crosses class lines. Like the naked bodies in the health spa, or the women hiding together in caves, Can’t and Won’t shows us what female community can look like. +

NAMWALI SERPELL
Skin Her


I first saw Her in the middle of the polar vortex. It was the middle of the day, and I was in the middle of a break-up. My soon-to-be-ex and I were on a trip to Chicago, and had some hours to kill before our flight home. At least this way, we wouldn’t be able to yell or weep or say the worst things. There is something excoriating about sitting in the dark next to someone you love, watching a movie about love, knowing both stories are going to end badly. At one point, I leaned over and whispered: “I’m just going to sit a couple of rows back, okay?” He nodded without looking at me. I took my coat and moved, trying not to cry. I watched the back of his head and, after a while, the film beyond it.

For months, I didn’t know how to describe the feeling of that day, tromping through snow, holding each other’s elbows to keep from slipping on ice, exchanging words about the movie to distract each other from the void opening up between us. Several months later, a bunch of friends dragged me out to see Under the Skin. I was still deep in the black hole of heartbreak, so I hadn’t heard of it and had no idea what sort of film I was walking into. It felt incredibly slow, its eeriness gradually building to a harrowing crescendo. I didn’t cry. But sitting once more...