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Zadie Smith, "Just Right"

Lauren Groff, "Flower Hunters"

Smith, Zadie. "Just Right." *Grand Union*. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

Just Right

'And your father's in it?'

'Yes, ma'am. He helps my mother and makes the s- the -'

'The scenery? Try to breathe, Donovan, there's really no hurry. I'm sure you'll catch the others in the square.'

Miss Steinhardt sat on the very edge of her desk, working her nails with a hobby pin for the subway grime underneath.

'Now, Annette Burnham told me she went to see the show last weekend, with her mother and baby brother. Liked it a lot. And she said your father does the puppets, too - and you, too, isn't that right?'

'Oh. Yes, ma'am.'

'Don't call me ma'am, Donovan, we're not in the South. The things you kids get from television.'

'Yes, Miss St-' began Donovan, although he had neither an idea of the South, being Greenwich Village born and raised, nor much conception of television, which he was not allowed to watch. It was from his mother - whose father had been English - that he had received the strange idea that *ma'am* was a romantic form of British address, suitable for ladies you especially admired.

'Anyway, that's fine,' said Miss Steinhardt and looked over at the door until the boy had stopped wrestling with her name and

Grand Union

closed his big wet mouth. 'Well, I'd say it's an unusual pastime for an eight-year-old. If I were you, I'd use it. Always best to use what you have.'

'Ma'am?'

'I'm sure the class would be interested to hear about it. You could bring in one of the puppets.'

'But-'

'Yes, Donovan?'

Miss Steinhardt moved one of her Mary Janes over the other and readjusted the long tartan skirt. She looked directly into the pale but not unbeautiful face: a long nose and bright green eyes, full, almost womanly lips, and a lot of dark hair, cut into a pair of slightly ludicrous curtains on either side of his narrow face. Really a boy who might have some hope of growing up into a Robert Taylor type - fine cheekbones, for a child - if it weren't for this absolute lack of purpose that revealed itself in every pore of his being.

'I already - g-got the pictures from the paper. I was planning on doing-' Donovan looked pleadingly at his teacher.

'Breathe, Donovan. It's not an interrogation. You're always in such a panic.'

'The museum, uptown. The one they've been building. They just st- started.'

'The Guggenwhatsit?'

Donovan nodded.

'Oh, well, yes, that would be fine,' said Miss Steinhardt, and wondered at the child, for she knew both G and S were the letters of his particular difficulty. She returned to her nails. Donovan, finely attuned to the moment when people grew bored of him,

picked up his book bag and made his way out onto Sullivan Street, into Washington Square.

Lit by a bright fall sun, the arch looked more like its Roman progenitor than ever, and the boy found that when he walked into the leaves they made a pleasing crunch, and some wild man in the fountain was talking of Christ, and another stood on a bench singing about marijuana. His mother must never hear of his class assignment. He swore this solemnly to himself on Fifth Avenue, before walking as slowly as could be managed back to the mews. At that charming row of cottages he stopped and clutched a replica Victorian lamp post.

'Donovan? What are you, cracked? Get in here!'

Irving Kendal stepped out of their little blue home and took up a spot in the middle of the street. He packed a wad of tobacco into a pipe and peered over at his only son.

'Get in here. Hanging off that thing.'

The boy stayed put. It had recently come to his attention that his father's W came out like a V, that his H had too much water in it, and that everything he said came from another era.

'Who're you meant to be? Gene Kelly?'

Worse were the clothes: a broad-check three-piece suit in yellows and browns, cut to create the illusion of height, with widely spaced buttons and trouser legs that kicked madly at the knee. In the cottage next door, Donovan could see Miss Clayton in her elegant black-and-red kimono, standing at the window with her Maltese, Pablo, in her arms. She examined the father and then the son and gave the son a warm look of sympathy. It would be a fine thing to walk straight past Irving to go drink from Miss Clayton's soda-stream and listen to her bebop

records, or sneak a look at the nude in her bathroom, or throw a beanbag around for Pablo to snap at with his harmless jaws. But such visits had to be rationed, out of loyalty. 'Four bedrooms, is it?' said Polly, if Donovan happened to visit the apartment of a friend with means. 'Well. I can see how you would have enjoyed that. Naturally. I know I would. Probably wouldn't want to come home at all.' Or: 'A soda-stream! Well, that's what disposable income means, I guess – not having anybody but yourself to dispose it *on*. But was it *deliciously* fizzy?' These conversations, much dreaded, always left Donovan with a free-floating sensation of guilt, all the less manageable for the indeterminacy of its source.

Now Polly emerged, barefoot despite the autumn chill. Donovan waved; his mother mimed her incapacity. In her left hand, she gripped a long piece of green velvet attached to a stake, held high to keep it from dragging on the ground, and in her right, three coloured feathers, each a foot long. Flying over to him, velvet streaming like the banner of a medieval princess, she moved with her toes pointed, so that what might simply be 'running' in another woman looked like a series of darting *pliés*.

'Just when I need you, darling – the whole of the forest has come away from the blocks. It'll need something better than glue this time – maybe tacks – and a whole new set of ferns from some very evergreen thing – it's of the utmost importance that it look lovely for Tuesday. Oh, Eleanor Glugel came by just after school and told me all about it and I think it's an excellent opportunity for the show, really excellent. I've been dying to talk to you about it – what took you so long? I had to listen to Glugel rattling on about her grandmother's tattoo for half an hour – that's what she's bringing in, to show – or tell – if you

can believe it — her own grandmother.’ Polly shuddered, and indicated a spot on the underside of her own delicate wrist: ‘What an uplifting subject! Oh, but don’t we all already *know* the world is full of horror? Do we *really* need to hear about it all the livelong day? There’s no romance in that child whatsoever. No clue of the magic of storytelling. I’ll bet you a dollar she wears a girdle already.’

All of this poured right into his ear, as Polly’s lips were exactly level with it. She pressed his hand; he pressed back. She was perfect — an elf princess who had sworn allegiance only to him. Yet sometimes he wished that she could see, as he did, that theirs was a steely bond, not as easily broken as she seemed to imagine — one which he would never, ever give up, no matter how many four-bedroom apartments or soda fountains he came across in this life. Who else could make him agree to appear before his classmates in a pair of long johns, a nightshirt and a droopy hat with a bell on it? What larger sign of fealty could a knight offer a princess than his pride?

But the next morning Miss Steinhardt made a further announcement: the children were to work in pairs, encouraging the values of compromise, shared responsibility, and teamwork, so lacking in these difficult times. She gazed in a pained sort of a way out the far window. Thus would a small public school in the Village, in its own little way, act as a beacon for the world. It took a few minutes for Donovan to recognize in this new directive the last-minute reprieve for which he had not even dared to hope. ‘Me and you!’ cried a child called Donna Ford, grabbing the hand of another child called Carla Woodbeck, who

flushed happily and replied, ‘Yeah, us two!’ and in another moment the room was filled with similar cries, requested and answered, all around Donovan, like a series of doors shutting in his face. Reduced to trying to catch the eye of Walter Ulbricht he found even Walter Ulbricht avoiding him, apparently holding out for a better option.

‘Part of my point,’ said Miss Steinhardt, in a queer wobbly voice that silenced her class, ‘is we don’t always get to choose whom we work with.’ Miss Steinhardt had spent yesterday at her grandparents’ home in Brooklyn Heights, watching tanks cross the Suez Canal. ‘Line up please as I call your names.’

The pairing was to be achieved alphabetically, as if a third of the class wasn’t coloured and Walter Ulbricht didn’t have a port-wine stain eating half his face. A second flurry of anxious voices went up; Miss Steinhardt ignored them; the double line was achieved; the bell rang. In the hall, Cassandra Kent fell in step with Donovan Kendal. They walked out like this, onto Sullivan, neither holding hands nor talking, yet clearly walking together. Once again he passed through Washington Square Park, as he did daily, but the fact of Cassie Kent transformed it: the leaves were not merely crunchy but entirely golden, and the fountain threw up glorious columns of water, over and over, an engine of joy. Whatever it was that glistened in the wide skull-gaps between her tight plaits smelled of a vacation somewhere wonderful.

‘Let’s do yours,’ said Cassie. ‘The museum. Since you got it all figured already.’

‘Oh. Well, all right.’

‘Gu— gu— guggenheim,’ she said, imitating him but somehow not unkindly. ‘Now, it’s gonna look like an ice cream, we know that.’

'A temple for the s— s— pirit. Hundred and ten feet tall,' said the boy, as they went under the arch. 'And this is, how tall d'you think —'

'Seventy-seven. So thirty per cent smaller,' said Cassie, without pausing. 'I'm mathematical. Wanna play?'

They took a left and sat on two stone benches under the shade of a sycamore tree, in front of a game Donovan had never before played in his life. Cassie drew a ratty string bag from her satchel and emptied a small pile of chess pieces onto the concrete table. Donovan tried to concentrate on her instructions. All around them, the men the Kendals usually took the long route round the park to avoid gathered close. One of them was completely topless under his shearling jacket and had old newspapers wound tightly round both shoes. Another had only a handful of teeth and wore a broken gambler's visor to keep the winter sun out of his eyes. He appeared to know Cassie.

'Hey, boy — you ready?' asked the visor man, of Donovan. He knelt down by both children and planted his rusty elbows on the table. 'This girl 'bout to school you.'

Donovan's plan was to watch each of Cassie's moves intently, hoping to follow the logic of the game, and, from there, recreate this logic in his own woolly mind. But where she moved her pieces ruthlessly over the concrete table, with an eye only to their strategic use, to Donovan these were noble Kings and Queens, and those were the castles in which they lived; here were the advisors they trusted, and there the minions waiting in lines outside the castle wall — and no amount of explanation from Cassie about the rigid rules that were meant to dictate all their movements could stop the boy from instinctively arranging his pieces by rank or relationship.

'Can't win anything, playing like that,' said Cassie, abducting Donovan's Queen, who had rashly stepped out of her chamber to stroke a favoured white steed. 'Can't even get *started* playing like that.'

By the time she had his King surrounded, not too long after they'd begun, she was sat up on her own heels, laughing and clapping her hands.

'Donovan Kendal,' she crowed, jabbing a finger into his sternum, 'you got no place to turn.'

'But couldn't this Cassie whoever-she-is just learn the lines?' Polly wanted to know. She was holding a tube of glue unwisely between her teeth. Her son passed the paper doily of Grandmother's cap and the cardboard face of the wolf, to be affixed to each other, a task that had to be redone almost every week. 'I mean, we could certainly do with another pair of hands.'

'But turns out it's got to be just two kids together. Just me and her. Teacher said so.'

'Well, all right, but I still don't see why that should —'

'She's a coloured girl,' said Donovan, hardly knowing why, but in its way, the intervention worked; for reasons of consistency it was now impossible for Polly to speak ill of the project. Anyone who knew anything at all about Polly Kendal knew she held the idea of Racial Integration almost as close to her heart as she did *The Power of Storytelling* or *The Innocence of Children*. Once upon a time — on what was back then a rare trip downtown — she herself had been caught up in the drama of Racial Integration, in the form of a large, excitable crowd pushing through Washington Square towards Judson Church. Being,

by temperament, 'a lifelong seeker', she'd joined this crowd, finding herself, a few minutes later, three pews back from the podium listening to the young Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. give a speech. A lively story for coffee mornings and parent-teacher conferences. 'His eyes! The only word I can find for them is "limpid". Limpid. I could see them looking straight at me: this kooky, sixteen-year-old scrap of a white girl from Brighton Beach. I mean, naturally I stood out. And I'll tell you something else and I'm not the least bit ashamed of it: whatever he would have asked me to do, I would have done it! I would have done anything!' But as it happened the Reverend King had not asked the teenage Polly to do anything at all and her practical involvement with the civil rights movement ended with that sermon, leaving behind only a residuum of enthusiasm.

'Why *shouldn't* the children of Harlem get the equal chance to hear our stories?' she asked Cassie two days later, as the child pulled a rattan chair to a circular table covered by a fringed, gypsy cloth, missing only a crystal ball. 'Telling someone a story is a way of showing love. Don't they deserve love?'

'I love everybody!' said Cassie, happily, and accepted the breadstick that was passed to her. 'But: if I am attacked, I will defend. You play chess, Mr Kendal?'

'Me?' Irving lowered his newspaper. 'Nope. Not my game.'

'I play.'

'You do?' Polly stopped stirring her spaghetti sauce and took a second, anthropological look at Cassie Kent. There were the girls in pigtails who skipped and sang by the fountain, and then there were the grubby old men hunched over the stone tables by the far west gate, but the two groups had always been quite separate in her mind. 'At school, you mean?'

'In the park sometimes. Whenever, wherever. I'm pretty good, too.'

'I'll bet you are!'

'I beat Donovan good.'

'Cassie, do you know Donny *never* brings any of his friends round to see his poor Maw and Paw,' said Polly, putting her hands on slender hips and delving into her small trove of accents. 'So I'm real glad he thought to bring you round to see us.'

'I was gonna show-and-tell my chess . . . but when you think about it, there ain't that much to show.'

'Of course, *our* show is up and ready to go, any time,' said Polly, slowly. The train was coming back down the line, and Donovan, tied to the track, did his best to divert it.

'But that's not – you can't teach a person to do that in just a few days. Puppets are a real craft,' he said, quoting Polly back to Polly, which seemed to calm her; she stopped biting the spoon and put it back in the pot.

'Well, that's very true. It *is* a craft. Not everyone can pick it up just like that.'

'There's a war on,' said Irving loudly, and flicked a finger at the front page. 'Somebody should show-and-tell about that.'

Cassie examined the photograph: 'They your people over there?'

'Hmm?' said Polly, with her back to them all. 'Oh, no, not mine. Irving's. Technically. I mean, he doesn't have any relatives over there or anything.'

'Technically?'

The door caught on the usual tile and failed to slam; Polly did not flinch. Polly, Cassie and Donovan listened to Irving

leave the cottage, and – such was the silence of the mews in those days – strike a match against an outside wall. Polly returned placidly to her sauce.

‘Of course, in the end,’ she said, with a contented look on her face, ‘we’re all one people.’

‘This is a scale model,’ said Cassie, holding up, in front of the class, a circular, inverted ziggurat made of cardboard, and Donovan read the scale off a piece of paper, and then Cassie said the name of the architect, and Donovan somehow got through the phrase ‘gun-placed concrete’ and it all passed off without a hitch. But in the hallway, afterwards, when they should have been simply congratulating each other, Cassie announced her intention to soon visit the Polly Kendal Puppet Theater.

‘But – it’s two bucks.’

‘I’m not in the poorhouse – we got two bucks!’

‘It’s just for little kids,’ tried Donovan, gripped by the horrible confirmation of a private fear – that all roads led back to his mother. ‘You’re too old. And it’s on a S– s– sunday. You’ll go to church, won’t you?’

‘I’m coming.’

‘It’s not two bucks, that was a lie,’ said Donovan, turning red. Having put his hand up inside Pinocchio every Saturday for the whole of the previous year, he had been unable to rid himself of a feeling of deep identification. ‘If you really want to know it’s only fifty c– fifty c–’

Most adults would keep looking into his face when he was in trouble, smiling kindly, until the word, whatever it happened to

be, was completed. Cassie, like all children, only said, ‘What? What? What?’ and groaned with impatience. She walked ahead. When he caught her up, she turned on him: ‘Man oh man, can’t you stop that?’

‘Yes,’ said Donovan, feebly, but perhaps that was just another lie. A man called Cory Wallace had assured the Kendals that their son could be easily ‘cured’ of his trouble, but he did not seem to be a proper doctor – he had no certificates on his wall and his office was next to a Chinese restaurant down on Canal. Still Polly had ‘faith in his sincerity’.

‘Donovan Kendal,’ said Cassie, sighing and putting her hands on her hips like somebody’s mother, ‘you tire me out. Wanna see my titty?’

They were within spitting distance of their classroom; it did not seem a viable prospect. But in the turn of the stairwell, Cassie pressed herself against a wall and pulled her pinafore to one side. Donovan stared dumbly at a breast no different than his own except that the nipple was slightly larger and the skin a deep and lovely brown. He put his palm flat against its flatness. They stood there like that until a footstep was heard on the stair. ‘If I was a hooker,’ whispered Cassie, pulling the fabric back over and looking serious, ‘that would be ten bucks easy.’ After which they walked to the exit and parted without another word.

Matters developed. One morning before school, Donovan lunged at her and was rewarded with a long, chaste, beautiful kiss: two closed mouths pressed against each other while Cassie jerked her head violently back and forth, as perhaps she had seen people do in the movies. At an arbitrary moment, she pulled away and primly flattened her pinafore against her chest.

'Don't think I've forgotten,' she said. 'I'm coming to that show.' That same afternoon, in a restroom cubicle, he asked to see her 'ding-a-ling' and she obliged – a confusion of black folds that parted to reveal a shockingly pink interior. He was permitted to put one finger in and then take it out again. After which it was hard to see how he could refuse her.

Black folds, green velvet. Donovan peering through. He could see Cassie sitting with the adults on the chairs, her feet up by her bottom, hugging herself. 'Please remember,' said Polly backstage, drawing the heads of her crouching husband and son towards her own, 'I don't want to see Goldilocks *or* the bowls until I've dismantled the woodshed. You were much too quick with that, last week, both of you – but you, Irving, in particular.' Irving thrust his hand violently into Papa Bear: 'Don't tell me what to do. I know what I'm doing.' Donovan rang the little bell, and the churchwarden dimmed the 'house lights' and Goldilocks's hair got caught on a nail, and all this had happened before, many times. In a sort of dream, Donovan got off his knees and walked round the front to invite all the little believers to join him in the Land of Nod. He was sure enough that he said his lines (carefully written by Polly, free of the dangerous letters) and sang his song; he could hear the children yelling, and knew the brown smudge of the wolf must be behind him, appearing and disappearing, in rhythm with their cries. But all he could see was Cassie's upper lip pulled tight into her mouth, and the deep crease of her brow. Somehow, he got through the half-hour. The house lights went up. Polly was by his side once more, all in black, a tiny piece of punctuation, and

she was saying My Husband Irving and My Son Donovan and they were all three holding hands and bowing.

'Cassie, you came!'

Polly reached both hands out to the girl. Cassie kept her own in the back pockets of her jeans.

'I'll tell you what: would you like to come backstage? There's a box of tricks back there.'

She led the girl behind the velvet to where Irving sat on the floor, smoking a cigarette, placing props and puppets into open shoeboxes. He held up the wolf and put it over Cassie's hand.

'You try – move it.'

Cassie moved it slightly to the right. Its Grandmother's cap came unglued and fell away. She handed it back to Irving.

'This goddamned –'

Polly rescued the wolf from her husband before it could be flung, and placed it back with its cap softly in a box marked 'Bad Guys #2'.

'Why all the puppets so raggedy?' Cassie asked.

'Well . . . if they look home-made, I suppose that's because we make them ourselves.'

'Thought you meant puppets like puppets,' said Cassie, turning to Donovan. 'Like Howdy Doody or somebody.'

Polly stepped in: 'Well, that's really not a hand puppet. That's a marionette. Which is fine – if you like that sort of thing. But it's really not puppetry.'

'Puppets got arms and legs and bodies,' Cassie persisted, pointing to Goldilocks at rest. 'That's just a cut-out cardboard face. It ain't even got more than one side.'

Polly put an arm around Cassie and led her back out into the hall. 'I hope we see you again,' she said, speaking over Cassie's head to the fleeing families. 'We do a charity show in the Bronx, and in Harlem, once a month, paid for by your generous contributions. Do please leave what you can in the bottle by the door. We've been doing this show in this spot for almost six years! But not everyone's as fortunate as our children of Greenwich Village.' She put a hand on top of Cassie's head. 'It's a wonderful opportunity for the children up there.'

'I live on Tenth and Fourteenth,' protested Cassie, but Polly had moved on, and was now accosting her small audience as they tried to take their leave. And how did you come to hear of the Polly Kendal Puppet Theater? A friend? An advertisement? The unlucky few looked up rather desperately; more fortunate, dexterous women had already managed to wedge their children back into their coats and were halfway down Hudson by now. So which was it: 'Word-of-mouth' or 'Publicity'? It took a moment to understand that the latter category referred to those little four-by-six cards, poorly illustrated and printed, that were to be seen in practically every café, dive bar, jazz den and restaurant beneath Union Square.

'On the first of the month, we go to the November cycle: *The Musicians of Bremen*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and *Cinderella*. Tell your friends!' Across the hall, Donovan lingered, half-hidden by the stage curtain, trying to choose between a number of things to say. He was still preparing the sentence, checking it for what he thought of as 'snakes' and 'goblins', when Cassie Kent simply ran past him, into the church, down the aisle — and was gone.

The Kendals were alone. Shoeboxes were numbered, closed

and placed in a suitcase in their correct order. The three-sided 'stage' was flattened, and care taken to fold the green velvet into a clean square. Irving switched off all the lights and collected a handful of dollars from the jar. Polly sat lightly on the closed suitcase and pressed its brass clips down.

'What happened to your little friend?'

Donovan pulled the nightcap off his own head and held it in both hands.

'But Donny . . . why would you even want to spend your time with a girl like that? Oh, I'm sure she's nice enough — I don't want to put you off her if you really *like* her, but she seemed to me to be so clearly — well, she has so little, oh, I don't know: fancy. Imagination. Whimsy. Trust me: you don't want that. Irving has no imagination whatsoever and look how hard that makes just about everything. A sense of imagination is so much more important to me than what colour someone happens to be or how much money they have or anything like that — if *that's* what you think you're standing there frowning about. The only thing I care about is what's going on in here,' she said, and thumped her narrow chest, but Donovan only looked at his shoes.

'Listen to me. Why do you think she doesn't like you? Because you have a little trouble sometimes when you speak? Because you're skinny? Don't you see that if she had even a scrap of vision she'd see what a first-class kid you are? But she's got no vision to speak of. I bet she's going home right now to turn on that idiot box and just *vegetate*.' Now his mother performed a funny mime — eyes crossed, tongue tucked in front of lower teeth — and Donovan found it impossible not to smile.

'All she does is watch TV,' he confided, and let the cap drop

Just Right

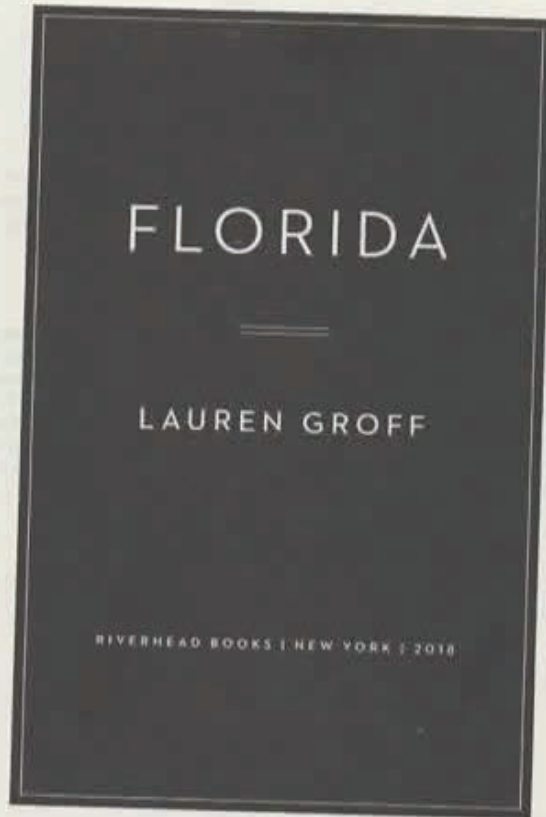
to the stone floor where he worried it with his foot a little. 'All weekend. She told me one time. Her mom doesn't care what she does, she really doesn't care one bit,' he added, employing a little imagination, 'and they never read or anything. The whole family thinks reading's a big waste of time. She's never heard of Thor or the Sirens or anybody!'

'Well, there you are.'

Polly bent down, picked up Wee Willie Winkie's nightcap, and with great tenderness, brushed the dust off it and placed it back on her son's head.

'People find their natural level, Donny. You'll see when you're older. It all works out.'

Groff, Lauren. "Flower Hunters." *Florida*.
New York: Riverhead Books, 2018.



2018

FLOWER HUNTERS

It is Halloween; she'd almost forgotten.

At the corner, a man is putting sand and tea-light candles into white paper bags.

He will return later with a lighter, filling the dark neighborhood with a glowing grid for the trick-or-treaters.

She wonders if this is wise, whether it is not, in fact, incredibly dangerous to put flames near so many small uncoordinated people with polyester hems.

All day today and yesterday she has been reading the early naturalist William Bartram, who traveled through Florida in 1774; because of him, she forgot Halloween.

She's most definitely in love with that dead Quaker.

This is not to say that she is no longer in love with her husband; she is, but after sixteen years together, perhaps they have blurred at the edges of each other's vision.

She says to her dog, who is beside her at the window

watching the candle man. One day you'll wake up and realize your favorite person has turned into a person-shaped cloud.

The dog ignores her, because the dog is wise.

In any event, her husband will inevitably win, since Bartram takes the form of dead trees and dreams, and her husband takes the form of warm pragmatic flesh.

She picks up her cell—she wants to tell her best friend, Meg, about her sudden overwhelming love for the ghost of a Quaker naturalist—but then she remembers that Meg doesn't want to be her best friend anymore.

A week ago, Meg said very gently, I'm sorry, I just need to take a break.

Outside, in Florida, there's still the hot yellow wool of daylight.

In the kitchen, her sons are eating their dinner of bean tacos glumly.

They had wanted to be ninjas, but she had to concoct something quickly, and now their costumes are hanging up in the laundry room.

Earlier, she put her own long-sleeved white button-down backward on the younger boy, crossed the arms around and tied them in the back, added a contractor's mask she'd slitted and colored with a silver Sharpie, and because he was armless, she pinned a candy bucket to the waist.

Cannibal Lecture, he is calling himself, a little too on the nose.

For the older boy, she cut eyeholes in a white sheet for an old-style ghost, though it rankled, a white boy in a white sheet, Florida still the Deep South; she hopes that the effect is mitigated by the rosebuds along the hems.

She also forgot the kindergarten's Spooky Breakfast this morning; she'd failed to bring the boo-berry muffins, and her smaller son had sat in his regular clothes in his tiny red chair, looking hopefully at the door as mothers and fathers in their masks and wigs who kept not being her poured in.

She wasn't even thinking of him at that hour; she was thinking of William Bartram.

Her husband comes in from work, sees the costumes, raises an eyebrow, remains merciful.

The boys brighten as if on a dimmer switch, her husband turns on "Thriller" to get in the mood, and she watches them bop around, a twist in the heart.

It's not yet dusk, but the shadows have stretched.

Her husband puts on an old green Mohawk wig, the boys shimmy their costumes on again, and the three of them head out.

He is alone in the house with the dog and William Bartram and the bags of wan lollipops that were all that remained on the drugstore's shelves.

It's necessary to hand out candy; her first year in the house, she righteously gave out toothbrushes, and it wasn't

an accident that a heavy oak branch smashed her window that night.

She can almost see three blocks away into the kitchen of Meg's house, where beautiful handmade costumes are being put on.

Meg loves this shit.

A week ago, when Meg broke up with her, they were eating ginger scones that Meg had made from scratch, and the bite in her mouth went so dry that she couldn't swallow for a long, long time.

She just nodded as Meg spoke kindly and firmly, and she felt each rip as her heart was torn into smaller and smaller pieces in Meg's capable hands.

Meg has enormous gray eyes and strong hips and shoulders, and hair like a glass of dark honey with sunshine in it.

Meg is the best person she knows, far better than herself or her husband, maybe even better than William Bartram.

Meg is the medical director of the abortion clinic in town, and all day she has to hold her patients' stories and their bodies, as well as the tragic lack of imagination from the chanting protesters on the sidewalk.

It would be too much for anyone, but it is not too much for Meg.

On the mantel in Meg's house, there are pictures of Meg with her children as babies, secured on her back, all three peering at the camera like koalas.

She, too, has often felt the urge to ride nestled cozily on Meg's back.

She would feel safe there, her cheek against her strongest friend.

But for the past week she has respected Meg's wish to take a break, and so she has not called Meg or stopped by her house for coffee or sent her children down the street to play with Meg's children until someone runs home screaming with a bruise or low blood sugar.

What is it about me that people need breaks from? she asks the dog, who looks as though she wants to say something but, out of innate gentleness, refrains.

A generous kind of dog, the labradoodle.

Well, William Bartram won't need a break from her.

The dead need nothing from us; the living take and take.

She brings William Bartram in his book costume out to the front porch, where it is cooler, and fetches the candy in a bowl and the dog and the wineglass so big it can hold a full bottle of ten-dollar Shiraz.

She settles herself under the bat lights she plugged in because she forgot to make jack-o'-lanterns and watches real bats swinging between the rooftops.

William Bartram seduced her with his drawings of horny turtles and dog-faced alligators, with his flights of ecstatic gratitude that lifted him toward God.

A week ago, after the ginger scones and suffocating with sadness, she took the afternoon off from work and

drove to Micanopy to look at antiques, because she feels solace when she touches things that have survived generations of human hands.

She stood in the center of Micanopy hating her unsweet tea because it was encased in plastic foam that would disintegrate and float on the surface of the waters forever; but then she found the plaque about William Bartram, who had passed through Micanopy in 1774, when it was a Seminole trading post called Cuscowilla.

The chief there at the time was called the Cowkeeper.

When the Cowkeeper heard what Bartram was doing, traipsing about Florida collecting floral specimens and faunal observations, he nicknamed him Puc-Puggy.

This translates, roughly, to Flower Hunter, which—as bestowed upon Bartram by a warrior and hunter and proud owner of slaves he'd stripped from the many tribes he'd brutally subjugated—was probably no great compliment.

Still, what would bright-eyed Puc-Puggy have seen of Florida before the automobile, before the airplane, before the planned communities, before the swarms of Mouseketeers?

A damp, dense tangle.

An Eden of dangerous things.

A trio of witches comes up the walk, and not one says thank you when she drops her bad candy into their bags.

An infant dressed as a superhero, something like sweet potato crusted on his cheeks, looks on as his mother holds

the pillowcase open for the treat and then clicks her tongue in disappointment.

But her street is a dark one and full of rentals, and the savvy trick-or-treaters mostly stay away.

It's just before twilight, and the sky is a brilliant orange.

She is inside the pumpkin.

In the absence of tiny ghouls, the lizards come out one last time, frilling their red necks, doing push-ups on the sidewalk.

Like Bartram, she was once a northerner dazzled by the frenzied flora and fauna here, but that was a decade ago, and things that once were alien life have become, simply, parts of her life.

She is no longer frightened of reptiles, she who is frightened of everything.

She is frightened of climate change, this summer the hottest on record, plants dying all around.

She is frightened of the small sinkhole that opened in the rain yesterday near the southeast corner of her house and may be the shy exploratory first steps of a much larger sinkhole.

She is frightened of her children, because now that they've arrived in the world she has to stay here for as long as she can but not longer than they do.

She is frightened because maybe she has already

become so cloudy to her husband that he has begun to look right through her; she's frightened of what he sees on the other side.

She is frightened that there aren't many people on the earth she can stand.

The truth is, Meg had said, back when she was still a best friend, you love humanity almost too much, but people always disappoint you.

Meg is someone who loves both humanity and people; William Bartram loved humanity and people and also nature.

He was a gifted and perceptive scientist who also believed in God, which seems a rather gymnastic form of philosophy.

She misses believing in God.

Here comes a prospector with a tiny pick; two scary teenage clowns in regular clothes; a courtly family, the parents crowned regents, the boy a knight in silver plastic, the girl a fluttery yellow princess.

What a relief that she has boys; this princess nonsense is a tragedy of multigenerational proportions.

Stop waiting for someone to save you, humanity can't even save itself! she says aloud to the masses of princesses seething in her brain; but it is her own black dog who blinks in agreement.

She reads by bat light and sees two William Bartrams as she does: the bright-eyed thirty-four-year-old explorer with the tan and sinewy muscles and sketchbook, besieged

by alligators, comfortable supping alone with mosquitoes and with rich indigo planters alike, and also Bartram's older, paler self, in the quiet of his Pennsylvania garden, projecting his joy and his younger persona onto the page.

Both Bartrams, the feeling body and the remembering brain, show themselves in his descriptions of a bull gator: *Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder.*

Usually, she's the one who trick-or-treats with the boys, with Meg and her three children, but this year Meg is out with Amara, a banker who is nice enough but who competes sneakily, through her children.

She can take Amara in small doses, the way she can take everyone except for her sons and her husband and Meg, the only four people on earth she could take in every dose imaginable to man.

Maybe, she thinks, Meg and Amara are talking about her.

They're not talking about me, she tells her dog.

Something has changed in the air; there's a lot of wind now, a sense of something lurking.

The spirits of the dead, she'd think, if she were superstitious.

The dark has thickened, and she hears music from the mansion down the road where every year the neighbors host an extravagant haunted house.

She is alone, and no trick-or-treaters have wandered by in an hour, the white sandbags of candlelight have burned out, and the renters have all turned off their lights, pretending not to be home.

She reads from Bartram's prologue, where he describes his hunter companion slaughtering a mother bear and then coming back mercilessly for the baby.

The continual cries of this afflicted child, bereft of its parent, affected me very sensibly, I was moved with compassion, and charging myself as if accessory to what now appeared to be a cruel murder, and endeavoured to prevail on the hunger to save its life, but to no effect! for by habit he had become insensible to compassion towards the brute creation, being now within a few yards of the harmless devoted victim, he fired, and laid it dead upon the body of the dam.

And now she is crying.

I'm not crying, she tells the dog, but the dog sighs deeply.

The dog needs to take a little break from her.

The dog stands and goes inside and crawls under the baby grand piano that she bought long ago from a lonely old lady, a piano that nobody plays.

A lonely old piano.

She always wanted to be the kind of person who could play the "Moonlight" Sonata.

She buries her failure in this, as she buries all her failures, in reading.

The wine is finished; she sucks a lollipop that only tastes red.

She reads for a long time until she hears what she thinks is her stomach growling, but it is, in fact, nearby thunder.

And just after the thunder comes the rain, and with the rain comes the memory of the baby sinkhole near the southeast corner of the house.

Her husband texts: the boys and he have taken shelter at the haunted house; there's tons of food, all their friends, so much fun, she should come!—but he knows her better than that, this would be the third circle of hell for her, she cannot abide parties, she could not abide any friends when she's lost the best one.

She can't even read Bartram anymore because the thought of the sinkhole is like a hole in the mouth where a tooth used to be.

She prods and prods the sinkhole in her mind.

The rain knocks at the metal roof, and she imagines it licking away at the limestone under her house, the way her children lick away at Everlasting Gobstoppers, which they are not allowed, but which she still somehow finds in sticky rainbow pools in their sock drawers.

The rain rains yet harder, and she puts on a yellow slicker and galoshes, and goes out with a flashlight.

Her face is being smacked by a giant hand, and another is smacking the crown of her head.

She puts a fist over her mouth to find the air to breathe and stands on the edge of the sinkhole, then crouches because the light is weak in the downpour.

No rain is collecting in the crater, which she thinks is extremely bad, because it must mean that the water is dripping through small cracks below, which means there's a place for the water to go, which means there is a cavity, and the cavity could be enormous, right there beneath her feet.

She becomes aware of a stream of water licking its way down the end of her hair and into the collar of her slicker, and then slipping coolly across the bare skin of her shoulder and then over her left breast and across her lower left rib cage and entering her navel and unfurling itself luxuriously over her right hip.

It feels remarkable, like a good cold blade across her skin.

It is erotic, she thinks, not the same thing as sexual.

Erotic is suckling her newborns, that animal smell and feel and warmth and tenderness.

Laying her head on her friend's shoulder and smelling the soap on her skin.

Letting the sun slide over her face without worrying about cancer or the ice caps melting.

She thinks of Bartram in the deep semitropical forest, far from his wife, aroused by the sight of an evocative blue flower that exists as a weed in her own garden, writing, in what is surely a double entendre or, if not, deeply

Freudian: *How fantastical looks the libertine Clitoria, mantling the shrubs, on the vistas skirting the groves!*

This, this is what she loves in Bartram so much!

The way he lets himself be full animal, a sensualist, the way he finds glory in the body's hungers and delights.

Florida, Bartram's ghost has been trying to tell her all along, is erotic.

For years now, she has been unable to see it all around her, the erotic.

The rain, impossibly, comes down harder, and even the flashlight is no help.

She is wet and alone and crouching in the dark over an unknowable hole, and now she locates the point of breakage.

Odd that it had taken so long.

Two weeks ago, she called Meg at eleven at night because she'd read an article about the coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico being covered with a mysterious whitish slime that was killing them, and she knew enough to know that when a reef collapses, so do dependent populations, and when they go, the oceans go, and Meg had answered, as she always does, but she had just put her youngest back to bed, and she was weary after a long day of helping women, and she said, Hey, relax, you can't do anything about it, go drink the rest of the bottle of wine, take a bath, we can talk in the morning if you're still sad.

That was it, that last call.

Poor Meg.

She is exhausting to everyone.

She would take a break from herself, too, but she doesn't have that option.

For a minute, she lets herself imagine the larger sinkhole below the baby one opening very slowly and cupping her and the house and the dog and the piano all the way to the very black bottom of the limestone hollow and gently depositing them there so far down that nobody could get her out, they could only visit, her family's heads peering once in a while over the lip, tiny pale bits against the blue sky.

From down there, everyone would seem so happy.

She comes in from the rain.

The kitchen is too bright.

Surely, in the history of humanity, she is not the only one to feel like this.

Surely, in the history of herself, all of those versions atop previous versions, she has felt worse.

It was called the New World, but Puc-Puggy understood that there was nothing new about it, *as almost every step we take over those fertile heights, discovers remains and traces of ancient human habitations and cultivation.*

She takes off the wet boots, the wet jacket, the wet skirt, the wet shirt, and, shivering, picks up her phone to call her husband.

The dog is licking the rain off her knees with a warm and loving tongue.

If she says sinkhole, her husband will race home in the rain with her children and their goodies.

They will put the boys to bed and stand together at the lip of the sinkhole, and maybe she will become solid again.

And so, when he picks up, she will say, Babe, I think we have a problem, but she will say it in the warmest, softest voice she owns, having learned from a master the way to deliver bad news.

She lets her hunger for her husband's voice grow until she is almost incandescent with it.

As the phone rings and rings, she says to the dog, who is looking up at her, Well, nobody can say that I'm not trying.