



ZADIE SMITH
INTIMATIONS

Peonies

JUST BEFORE I left New York, I found myself in an unexpected position: clinging to the bars of the Jefferson Market Garden, looking in. A moment before, I'd been on the run as usual, intending to exploit two minutes of time I'd carved out of the forty-five-minute increments into which, back then, I divided my days. Each block of time packed tight and leveled off precisely, like a child prepping a sandcastle. Two "free" minutes meant a macchiato. (In an ideal, cashless world, if nobody spoke to me.) In those days, the sharp end of my spade was primed against chatty baristas, overly friendly mothers, needy students, curious readers—anyone I considered a threat to the program. Oh, I was very well defended. But this was a sneak attack . . . by horticulture. Tulips. Springing up in a little city garden, from a triangle of soil where

IRRESISTIBLE

three roads met. Not a very sophisticated flower—a child could draw it—and these were garish: pink with orange highlights. Even as I was peering in at them I wished they were peonies.

City born, city bred, I wasn't aware of having an especially keen interest in flowers—at least no interest strong enough to forgo coffee. But my fingers were curled around those iron bars. I wasn't letting go. Nor was I alone. Either side of Jefferson stood two other women, both around my age, staring through the bars. The day was cold, bright, blue. Not a cloud between the World Trade and the old seven-digit painted phone number for Bigelow's. We all had somewhere to be. But some powerful instinct had drawn us here, and the predatory way we were ogling those tulips put me in mind of Nabokov, describing the supposed genesis of *Lolita*: "As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the *Jardin des Plantes*, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage."

I've always been interested in that quote—without believing a word of it. (Something inspired *Lolita*. I'm certain no primates were involved.) The scientist offers the piece of charcoal expecting or hoping for a transcendent revelation about this ape, but the revelation turns out to be one of contingency, of a certain set of circumstances—of things as they happen to be. The ape is caged in by its nature, by its instincts, and by its circumstance. (Which of these takes the primary role is for zoologists to debate.) So it goes. I didn't need a Freudian to tell me that three middle-aged women, teetering at the brink of peri-menopause, had been drawn to a gaudy symbol of fertility and renewal in the middle of a barren concrete metropolis . . . and, indeed, when we three spotted each other there were shamefaced smiles all round. But in my case the shame was not what it would have once been, back in the day—back when I first read *Lolita*, as a young woman. At that time, the cage of my circumstance, in my mind, was my gender. Not its actuality—I liked my body well enough. What I didn't like was what I thought it signified: that I was tied to my

"nature," to my animal body—to the whole simian realm of instinct—and far more elementally so than, say, my brothers. I had "cycles." They did not. I was to pay attention to "clocks." They needn't. There were special words for me, lurking on the horizon, prepackaged to mark the possible future stages of my existence. I might become a spinster. I might become a crone. I might be a babe or a MILF or "childless." My brothers, no matter what else might befall them, would remain men. And in the end of it all, *if I was lucky*, I would become that most piteous of things, an old lady, whom I already understood was a figure everybody felt free to patronize, even children.

"(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman"—I used to listen to that song and try to imagine its counterpart. You could make someone feel like a "real" man—no doubt its own kind of cage—but never a natural one. A man was a man was a man. He bent nature to his will. He did not submit to it, except in death. Submission to nature was to be my realm, but I wanted no part of that, and so I would refuse to keep any track whatsoever of my men-

strual cycle, preferring to cry on Monday and find out the (supposed) reason for my tears on Tuesday. Yes, much better this than to properly prepare for a blue Monday or believe it in any way inevitable. My moods were my own. They had no reflection in nature. I refused to countenance the idea that anything about me might have a cyclic, monthly motion. And if I had children one day, I would have them "on my own timeline," irrespective of how the bells were tolling on all those dreaded clocks in the women's magazines. Of "broodiness" I would hear nothing: I was not a hen. And if, when I was in my twenties, any bold Freudian had dared to suggest that my apartment—filled as it was with furry cushions and furry rugs and furry bolsters, furry throws and furry footstools—in any sense implied a sublimated desire for animal company, or that I was subconsciously feathering my nest in expectation of new life, well, I would have shown that impertinent Freudian the door. I was a woman, but not *that* kind of woman. "Internalized misogyny," I suppose they'd call all of the above now. I have no better term. But at the hot

core of it there was an obsession with control, common among my people (writers).

Writing is routinely described as “creative”—this has never struck me as the correct word. Planting tulips is creative. To plant a bulb (I imagine, I’ve never done it) is to participate in some small way in the cyclic miracle of creation. Writing is control. The part of the university in which I teach should properly be called the Controlling Experience Department. Experience—mystifying, overwhelming, conscious, subconscious—rolls over everybody. We try to adapt, to learn, to accommodate, sometimes resisting, other times submitting to, whatever confronts us. But writers go further: they take this largely shapeless bewilderment and pour it into a mold of their own devising. Writing is *all* resistance. Which can be a handsome, and sometimes even a useful, activity—on the page. But, in my experience, turns out to be a pretty hopeless practice for real life. In real life, submission and resistance have no predetermined shape. Even more befuddling, to a writer like me, is that the values normally associated with those words on

a page—submission, negative; resistance, positive—cannot be relied upon out in the field. Sometimes it is right to submit to love, and wrong to resist affection. Sometimes it is wrong to resist disease and right to submit to the inevitable. And vice versa. Each novel you read (never mind the novels you write) will give you some theory of which attitude is best to strike at which moment, and—if you experience enough of them—will provide you, at the very least, with a wide repertoire of possible attitudes. But out in the field, experience has no chapter headings or paragraph breaks or ellipses in which to catch your breath . . . it just keeps coming at you.

Now, more than ever—to use a popular narrative mold—I know that. It happens that the day I was drawn to those tulips was a few days before the global humbling began—one that arrived equally for men and women both—but in my own shallow puddle of experience it’s these dumb tulips that served as a tiny, early preview of what I now feel every moment of every day, that is, the complex and ambivalent nature of “submission.” If only it were possible to simply

state these feelings without insisting on them, without making an argument or a dogma out of them! This type of woman and *that* type of woman—just so many life rings thrown to a drowning Heraclitus. Each one a different form of fiction. Is it possible to be as flexible on the page—as shamelessly self-forgiving and ever changing—as we are in life? We can't seem to find the way. Instead, to write is to swim in an ocean of hypocrisies, moment by moment. We know we are deluded, but the strange thing is that this delusion is necessary, if only temporarily, to create the mold in the first place, the one into which you pour everything you can't give shape to in life. This is all better said by Kierkegaard, in a parable:

"THE DOG KENNEL BY THE PALACE"

To what shall we compare the relation between the thinker's system and his actual existence?

A thinker erects an immense building, a system, a system which embraces the whole of existence and world-history etc.—and if we contemplate his personal life, we discover to our astonishment this

terrible and ludicrous fact, that he himself personally does not live in this immense high-vaulted palace, but in a barn alongside of it, or in a dog kennel, or at the most in the porter's lodge. If one were to take the liberty of calling his attention to this by a single word, he would be offended. For he has no fear of being under a delusion, if only he can get the system completed . . . by means of the delusion.

They were tulips. I wanted them to be peonies. In my story, they are, they will be, they were and will forever be peonies—for, when I am writing, space and time itself bend to my will! Through the medium of tenses! In real life, the dog kennel is where I make my home. When I was a kid, I thought I'd rather be a brain in a jar than a "natural woman." I have turned out to be some odd combination of both, from moment to moment, and with no control over when and where or why those moments occur. Whether the "natural" part of my womanhood is an essential biological fact or an expression (as de Beauvoir argued) of an acculturation so deep it looks very

zadie smith

much like roots growing out of the bulb, at this point in my life I confess I don't know and I don't care. I am not a scientist or a sociologist. I'm a novelist. Who can admit, late in the day, during this strange and overwhelming season of death that collides, outside my window, with the emergence of dandelions, that spring sometimes rises in me, too, and the moon may occasionally tug at my moods, and if I hear a strange baby cry some part of me still leaps to attention—to submission. And once in a while a vulgar strain of spring flower will circumvent a long-trained and self-consciously strict downtown aesthetic. Just before an unprecedented April arrives and makes a nonsense of every line.

The American Exception

HE SPEAKS TRUTH so rarely that when you hear it from his own mouth—March 29, 2020—it has the force of revelation: “I wish we could have our old life back. We had the greatest economy that we’ve ever had, and we didn’t have death.”

Well, maybe not the whole, unvarnished truth. The first clause was neither true nor false: it described only a desire. A desire which, when I heard it—and found its bleating echo in myself—I’ll admit I weighed in my hand, for a moment, like a shiny apple. It sounded like a decent “wartime” wish, war being the analogy he’s chosen to use. But no one in 1945 wished to return to the “old life,” to return to 1939—except to resurrect the dead. Disaster demanded a new dawn. Only new thinking can lead to a new dawn. We know that. Yet as he said it—

How

"I wish we could have our old life back"—he caught his audience in a moment of weakness: in their dressing gowns, weeping, or on a work call, or with a baby on their hip *and* a work call, or putting on a home-made hazmat suit to brave the subway, on the way to work that cannot be done at home, while millions of bored children climbed the walls from coast to coast. And, yes, in that brittle context, "the old life" had a comforting sound, if only rhetorically, like "once upon a time" or "but I LOVE him!" The second clause brought me back to my senses. Snake oil, snake oil, snake oil. The devil is consistent, if nothing else. I dropped that apple, and, lo, it was putrid and full of worms.

Then he spoke the truth: *we didn't have death.*

We had dead people. We had casualties and we had victims. We had more or less innocent bystanders. We had body counts and sometimes even photos in the newspapers of body bags, though many felt it was wrong to show them. We had "unequal health

outcomes." But, in America, all of these involved some culpability on the part of the dead. Wrong place, wrong time. Wrong skin color. Wrong side of the tracks. Wrong Zip Code, wrong beliefs, wrong city. Wrong position of hands when asked to exit the vehicle. Wrong health insurance—or none. Wrong attitude to the police officer. What we were completely missing, however, was the concept of death itself, death absolute. The kind of death that comes to us all, irrespective of position. Death absolute is the truth of our existence as a whole, of course, but America has rarely been philosophically inclined to consider existence as a whole, preferring instead to attack death as a series of discrete problems. Wars on drugs, cancer, poverty, and so on. Not that there is anything ridiculous about trying to lengthen the distance between the dates on our birth certificates and the ones on our tombstones: ethical life depends on the meaningfulness of that effort. But perhaps nowhere in the world has this effort—and its relative success—been linked so emphatically to money as it is in America.

Maybe this is why plagues—being considered insufficiently hierarchical in nature, too inattentive to income disparity—were long ago relegated to history in the American imagination, or to other continents. In fact, as he made clear early on in his presidency, entire “shithole” countries were to be considered culpable for their own high death rates—they were by definition in the wrong place (over there) at the wrong time (an earlier stage of development). Such places were plagued in the permanent sense, by not having the foresight to be America. Even global mass extinction—in the form of environmental collapse—was not going to reach America, or would reach it only ultimately, at the very last minute. Relatively secure, in its high-walled haven, America would feast on whatever was left of its resources, still great by comparison with the suffering out there, beyond its borders.

But now, as he so rightly points out, we are great with death—we are mighty with it. There is a fear, when all of this is said and done, that America will lead the world in it. And yet, perversely, the supposed

democratic nature of plague—the way in which it can strike all registered voters equally—turns out to be somewhat overstated. A plague it is, but American hierarchies, hundreds of years in the making, are not so easily overturned. Amid the great swath of indiscriminate death, some old American distinctions persist. Black and Latino people are now dying at twice the rate of white and Asian people. More poor people are dying than rich. More in urban centers than in the country. The virus map of the New York boroughs turns redder along precisely the same lines as it would if the relative shade of crimson counted not infection and death but income brackets and middle-school ratings. Untimely death has rarely been random in these United States. It has usually had a precise physiognomy, location and bottom line. For millions of Americans, it’s always been a war.

Now, apparently for the first time, he sees it. And, in a hurry for glory, he calls himself a wartime president. Let him take that title, as the British prime minister, across the ocean, likewise attempts to place himself in the Churchillian role. Churchill (who actu-

ally fulfilled his wartime role) learned the hard way that even when the people follow you into war, and even when they agree you've had a "good" war, this does not necessarily mean they want to return to the "old life," or be led by you into the new one. War transforms its participants. What was once necessary appears inessential; what was taken for granted, unappreciated and abused now reveals itself to be central to our existence. Strange inversions proliferate. People find themselves applauding a national health service that their own government criminally underfunded and neglected these past ten years. People thank God for "essential" workers they once considered lowly, who not so long ago they despised for wanting fifteen bucks an hour.

Death has come to America. It was always here, albeit obscured and denied, but now everybody can see it. The "war" that America is waging against it has no choice but to go above, around and beyond an empty figurehead. This is a collective effort; there are millions of people involved in it, and they won't easily forget what they have seen. They won't forget

the abject, exceptionally American, predicament of watching individual states, as New York's governor, Andrew Cuomo, memorably put it, bidding as if "on eBay" for lifesaving equipment. Death comes to all—but in America it has long been considered reasonable to offer the best chance of delay to the highest bidder.

One potential hope for the new American life is that, within it, such an idea will finally become inconceivable, and that the next generation of American leaders might find inspiration not in Winston Churchill's bellicose rhetoric but in the peacetime words spoken by Clement Attlee, his opposite number in the House of Commons, the leader of the Labour Party, who beat Churchill in a postwar landslide: "The war has been won by the efforts of all our people, who, with very few exceptions, put the nation first and their private and sectional interests a long way second. . . . Why should we suppose that we can attain our aims in peace—food, clothing, homes, education, leisure, social security and full employment for all—by putting private interests first?"

zadie smith

As Americans never tire of arguing, there may be many areas of our lives in which private interest plays the central role. But, as postwar Europe, exhausted by absolute death, collectively decided, health care shouldn't be one of them.

Something to Do

IF YOU MAKE things, if you are an "artist" of whatever stripe, at some point you will be asked—or may ask yourself—"why" you act, sculpt, paint, whatever. In the writing world, this question never seems to get old. In each generation, a few too many people will feel moved to pen an essay called, inevitably, "Why I Write" or "Why Write?" under which title you'll find a lot of convoluted, more or less self-regarding reasons and explanations. (I've contributed to this genre myself.) Only a few of them are any good* and none of them (including my own) see fit to mention the surest motivation I know, the one I feel deepest within myself, and which, when all is said, done,

*My current favorite is "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway" by Toni Cade Bambara, written back in 1980, which has the advantage of having a no-bullshit title and very little bullshit in the body of the piece.

stripped away—as it is at the moment—seems to be at the truth of the matter for a lot of people, to wit: *it's something to do*. I used to stand at podiums or in front of my own students and have that answer on the tip of my tongue, but knew if I said it aloud it would be mistaken for a joke or fake humility or perhaps plain stupidity. . . . Now I am gratified to find this most honest of phrases in everybody's mouths all of a sudden, and in answer to almost every question. Why did you bake that banana bread? It was something to do. Why did you make a fort in your living room? Well, it's something to do. Why dress the dog as a cat? It's something to do, isn't it? Fills the time.

Out of an expanse of time, you carve a little area—that nobody asked you to carve—and you do “something.” But perhaps the difference between the kind of something that I'm used to, and this new culture of doing something, is the moral anxiety that surrounds it. The something that artists have always done is more usually cordoned off from the rest of society, and by mutual agreement this space is considered a sort of charming but basically

useless playpen, in which adults get to behave like children—making up stories and drawing pictures and so on—though at least they provide some form of pleasure to serious people, doing actual jobs. The more utilitarian-minded defenders of art justify its existence by insisting upon its potential political efficacy, which is usually overstated. (Artists themselves are especially fond of overstating it.) But even if you believe in the potential political efficacy of art—as I do—few artists would dare count on its timeliness. It's a delusional painter who finishes a canvas at two o'clock and expects radical societal transformation by four. Even when artists write manifestos, they are (hopefully) aware that their exigent tone is, finally, borrowed, only echoing and mimicking the urgency of the guerrilla's demands, or the activist's protests, rather than truly enacting it. The people sometimes demand change. They almost never demand art. As a consequence, art stands in a dubious relation to necessity—and to time itself. It is something to do, yes, but *when* it is done, and whether it is done at all, is generally considered a question for artists alone.

An attempt to connect the artist's labor with the work of truly laboring people is frequently made but always strikes me as tenuous, with the fundamental dividing line being this question of the clock. Labor is work done by the clock (and paid by it, too). Art takes time and divides it up as art sees fit. It is something to do. But the crisis has taken this familiar division between the time of art and the time of work and transformed it. Now there are essential workers—who do not need to seek out something to do; whose task is vital and unrelenting—and there are the rest of us, all with a certain amount of time on our hands. (Not to mention an economic time bomb, which, for many people, exploded within the first few weeks—within the first few days. One of the radical political possibilities of our new, revelatory expanse of “free” time—as many have noted—is that it might create a collective demand to reassess and reconfigure, as a society, how we protect the rights of those whose work exists only in the present moment, without security or protection against unknown futures, the most obvious unknown future being “sick leave.”)

The rest of us have been suddenly confronted with the perennial problem of artists: time, and what to do in it.

What strikes me at once is how conflicted we feel about this new liberty and/or captivity. On the one hand, like pugs who have been lifted out of a body of water, our little limbs keep pumping on, as they did when we were hurrying off to our workplaces. Do we know how to stop? Those of us from puritan cultures feel “work must be done,” and so we make the cake, or start the gardening project, or begin negotiation with the other writer in the house for those kid-free hours each day in which to work on “something.” We make banana bread, we sew dresses, we go for a run, we complete all the levels of Minecraft, we do *something*, then photograph that something, and not infrequently put it online. Reactions are mixed, even in our own hearts. Even as we do something, we simultaneously accuse ourselves: *you use this extremity as only another occasion for self-improvement, another pointless act of self-realization*. But isn't it the case that everybody finds their capabilities returning to them,

even if it's only the capacity to mourn what we have lost? We had delegated so much.

It seems it would follow that writers—so familiar with empty time and with being alone—should manage this situation better than most. Instead, in the first week I found out how much of my old life was about hiding from life. Confronted with the problem of life served neat, without distraction or adornment or superstructure, I had almost no idea of what to do with it. Back in the playpen, I carved out meaning by creating artificial deprivations *within* time, the kind usually provided for people by the real limitations of their real jobs. Things like “a firm place to be at nine a.m. every morning” or a “boss who tells you what to do.” In the absence of these fixed elements, I’d make up hard things to do, or things to abstain from. Artificial limits and so on. Running is what I know. Writing is what I know. Conceiving self-implemented schedules: teaching day, reading day, writing day, repeat. What a dry, sad, small idea of a life. And how exposed it looks, now that the people

I love are in the same room to witness the way I do time. The way I’ve done it all my life.

FOR ME, THE cliché is true: only way out is through. Trying to preserve some “space for yourself” in the crowded domestic sphere feels like obsessively cupping your hands around thin air. You carve it out, the time you need, after much anxiety and debate, and get into the separate space and look between your hands and there it is—nothing. An empty victory. At the end of April, in a powerful essay by another writer, Ottessa Moshfegh, I read this line about love: “Without it, life is just ‘doing time.’” I don’t think she intended by this only romantic love, or parental love, or familial love or really any kind of love in particular. At least, I read it in the Platonic sense: Love with a capital *L*, an ideal form and essential part of the universe—like “Beauty” or the color red—from which all particular examples on earth take their nature. Without this element present, in some form, somewhere in our lives, there really *is* only time, and

there will always be too much of it. Busyness will not disguise its lack. Even if you're working from home every moment God gives—even if you don't have a minute to spare—still all of that time, without love, will feel empty and endless.

I write because . . . well, the best I can say for it is it's a psychological quirk of mine developed in response to whatever personal failings I have. But it can't ever meaningfully fill the time. There is no great difference between novels and banana bread. They are both just something to do. They are no substitute for love. The difficulties and complications of love—as they exist on the other side of this wall, away from my laptop—is the task that is before me, although task is a poor word for it, for unlike writing, its terms cannot be scheduled, preplanned or determined by me. Love is not something to do, but something to be experienced, and something to go through—that must be why it frightens so many of us and why we so often approach it indirectly. Here is this novel, made with love. Here is this banana bread, made with love. If it weren't for this habit of indirection, of course,

there would be no culture in this world, and very little meaningful pleasure for any of us. Although the most powerful art, it sometimes seems to me, is an experience and a going-through; it is love comprehended by, expressed and enacted through the artwork itself, and for this reason has perhaps been more frequently created by people who feel themselves to be completely alone in this world—and therefore wholly focused on the task at hand—than by those surrounded by “loved ones.” Such art is rare: we can't all sit cross-legged like Buddhists day and night meditating on ultimate matters.* Or I can't. But I also don't want to just do time anymore, the way I used to.

And yet, in my case, I can't let it go: old habits die hard. I can't rid myself of the need to do “something,” to make “something,” to feel that this new expanse of

*There needn't be anything fluffy or falsely positive about this concept of love through art: the most apparently nihilistic or antisentimental art has still committed itself to shaping time into something other than itself, and to the process of having that something witnessed or experienced by another person—the audience—and this, to paraphrase Kafka, is “of a faith value that can never be exhausted.” In the remarkable cases of Yukio Mishima and Édouard Levé, even the act of suicide—that most complete and final rejection of the idea of doing “something” available to us—was yet capable of being refashioned into a work of art.

Zadie Smith

time hasn't been "wasted." Still, it's nice to have company. Watching this manic desire to make or grow or do "something," that now seems to be consuming everybody, I do feel comforted to discover I'm not the only person on this earth who has no idea what life is for, nor what is to be done with all this time aside from filling it.

POSTSCRIPT: CONTEMPT AS A VIRUS

You start to think of contempt as a virus. Infecting individuals first, but spreading rapidly through families, communities, peoples, power structures, nations. Less flashy than hate. More deadly. When contempt kills you, it doesn't have to be a vendetta or even entirely conscious. It can be a passing whim. It's far more common, and therefore more lethal. "The virus doesn't care about you." And likewise with contempt: in the eyes of contempt, you don't even truly rise to the level of a hated object—that would involve a full recognition of your existence. Before contempt, you are simply not considered as others are, you are something less than a whole person, not quite a complete citizen. Say . . . three fifths of the whole. You are statistical. You are worked around. You are a calculated loss. You have no recourse. You do not

represent capital, and therefore you do not represent power. You are of no consequence. No well-dressed fancy lawyer will come running to the scene to defend you, carrying a slim attaché case, crying, "That's my client!" You are easily jailed and easily forgotten. The stakes are low. And so: contempt.

In England, we were offered an infuriating but comparatively comic rendering of this virus, in the form of the prime minister's "ideas man," Dominic, whose most fundamental idea is that the categorical imperative doesn't exist. Instead there is one rule for men like him, men with ideas, and another for the "people." This is an especially British strain of the virus. Class contempt. Technocratic contempt. Philosopher king contempt. When you catch the British strain, you believe the people are there to be ruled. They are to be handled, played, withstood, tolerated—up to a point—ridiculed (behind closed doors), sentimentalized, bowdlerized, nudged, kept under surveillance, directed, used and closely listened to, but only for the purposes of data collection, through which means you harvest the raw material

required to manipulate them further. At the press conference, you could see Dominic was riddled with the virus—had been for months. Only his mouth went through the motions. His mouth said that he had driven thirty miles from Durham to Barnard Castle to test his eyesight. The rest of his face was overwhelmed with the usual symptoms, visible to all. Boredom, annoyance, impatience, incredulity. His eyes, refreshed by the driving test, spoke volumes: *Why are you bothering me with this nonsense?* Contempt. Back in February, "herd immunity" had been a new concept for the people—or that broad cross section of the people who are neither epidemiologists nor regular readers of the *New Scientist*. But for an ideas man, the phrase must already have felt profoundly familiar, being a seamless continuation of a long-held personal credo. Immunity. From the herd.

THE OFFICER HAD a sadistic version of the same face. *Why are you bothering me with this bullshit?* The bullshit in this case being a man explaining he couldn't breathe under the pressure of the officer's knee on

his neck. A man called George. He was alerting the officer to the fact that he was about to die. You'd have to hate a man a lot to kneel on his neck till he dies in plain view of a crowd and a camera, knowing the consequences this would likely have upon your own life. (Or you'd have to be pretty certain of immunity from the herd—not an unsafe bet for a white police officer, historically, in America.) But this was something darker—deadlier. It was the virus, in its most lethal manifestation.

The immediate infection comes the moment the store in question calls the cops and the voice down the line asks after the race of this master criminal who has just tried to use a phony twenty-dollar bill with the ink still wet upon it. To have any real chance of catching the virus from the answer "white," you'd have to add a qualifier like "homeless" or "on meth." The lack of capital would have to be strikingly evident—visible. But the answer "black" immediately carries a heavy load, and a number of potentially violent actions—that would have been unlikely otherwise—suddenly become psychologically possible. You don't

just lecture or book this type of body or take it down to the station. It would have no respect for you if you did that—after all, it is more than used to rough treatment. Nor can it really be taken seriously when it complains of pain, as this particular type of American body is well known to be able to withstand all kinds of improbable discomforts. It lives in cramped spaces and drinks water with lead in it, and gets diabetes as a matter of course, and has all kinds of health issues that seem to be some mysterious part of its culture. It sits in jail cells without windows for years at a time. And even if it did complain—without money, without that well-dressed lawyer running to its aid—what recourse would it have?

Patient zero of this particular virus stood on a slave ship four hundred years ago, looked down at the sweating, bleeding, moaning mass below deck and reverse-engineered an emotion—contempt—from a situation that he, the patient himself, had created. He looked at the human beings he had chained up and noted that they seemed to be the type of people who wore chains. So unlike other people. Frighten-

Zadie Smith

ingly unlike! Later, in his cotton fields, he had them whipped and then made them go back to work and thought, *They can't possibly feel as we do. You can whip them and they go back to work.* And having thus placed them in a category similar to the one in which we place animals, he experienced the same fear and contempt we have for animals. Animals being both subject to man and a threat to him simultaneously.

They have no capital, not even their labor.

Anything can be done to them.

They have no recourse.

Three strands in the DNA of the virus. In theory, these principles of slavery were eradicated from the laws of the land—not to mention the hearts and minds of the people—long ago. In theory. In practice, they pass like a virus through churches and schools, adverts and movies, books and political parties, courtrooms and the prison-industrial complex and, of course, police departments. Like a virus, they work invisibly within your body until you grow sick with them. I truly be-

Intimations

lieve that many people are unaware that they carry the virus at all until the very moment you find yourself phoning the cops to explain the race of the man you thought looked suspicious walking through his own neighborhood, or who spoke back to you in Central Park, or whatever the fuck it is. One of the quirks of the virus—as James Baldwin pointed out—is that it makes the sufferer think the symptom is the cause. Why else would the carriers of this virus work so hard—even now, even in the bluest states in America—to ensure their children do not go to school with the children of these people whose lives supposedly matter? Why would they still—even now, even in the bluest states in America—only consider a neighborhood worthy of their presence when its percentage of black residents falls low enough that they can feel confident of the impossibility of infection? This mentality looks over the fence and sees a plague people: plagued by poverty, first and foremost. *If this child, formed by poverty, sits in a class with my child, who was formed by privilege, my child will suffer—my child will catch their virus.* This not-so-secret terror is lodged as firmly in

blue hearts as in red; it plays a central role in the spread of the contagion. (To fear the contagion of poverty is reasonable. To keep voting for policies that ensure the permanent existence of an underclass is what is meant by "structural racism.") And it's a naïve American who at this point thinks that integration—if it were ever to actually occur—would not create some initial losses on either side. A long-preserved privilege dies hard. A long-preserved isolation—even if it has been forced—is painful to emerge from. But I am talking in hypotheticals: the truth is that not enough carriers of this virus have ever been willing to risk the potential loss of any aspect of their social capital to find out what kind of America might lie on the other side of segregation. They are very happy to "blackout" their social media for a day, to read all-black books, and "educate" themselves about black issues—as long as this education does not occur in the form of actual black children attending their actual schools.

If the virus and the inequalities it creates were ever to leave us, America's extremities would fade. They wouldn't disappear—no country on Earth can

claim that—but some things would no longer be considered normal. There would no longer be those who are taught Latin and those who are barely taught to read. There would no longer be too many people who count their wealth in the multimillions and too many who live hand to mouth. A space launch would not be hard followed by a riot. White college kids would not smoke weed in their dorms while their black peers caught mandatory sentences for selling it to them. America would no longer be that thrilling place of unbelievable oppositions and spectacular violence that makes more equitable countries appear so tame and uneventful in comparison. But the questions have become: Has America metabolized contempt? Has it lived with the virus so long that it no longer fears it? Is there a strong enough desire for a different America within America? Real change would involve a broad recognition that the fatalist, essentialist race discourse we often employ as a superficial cure for the symptoms of this virus manages, in practice, to smoothly obscure the fact that the DNA of this virus is *economic at base*. Therefore, it is most ef-

Zadie Smith

fectively attacked when many different members of the plague class—that is, all economically exploited people, whatever their race—act in solidarity with each other. It would involve the (painful) recognition that this virus infects not only individuals but entire power structures, as any black citizen who has been pinned to the ground by a black police officer can attest. If our elected representatives have contempt for us, if the forces of so-called law and order likewise hold us in contempt, it's because they think we have no recourse, and no power, except for the one force they have long assumed too splintered, too divided and too forgotten to be of any use: the power of the people. The time has long past when only one community's work would be required to cure what ails us.

I used to think that there would one day be a vaccine: that if enough black people named the virus, explained it, demonstrated how it operates, videoed its effects, protested it peacefully, revealed how widespread it really is, how the symptoms arise, how so many Americans keep giving it to each other, irresponsibly and shamefully, generation after gen-

Intimations

eration, causing intolerable and unending damage both to individual bodies and to the body politic—I thought if that knowledge became as widespread as could possibly be managed or imagined that we might finally reach some kind of herd immunity. I don't think that anymore.