



ZADIE SMITH
INTIMATIONS



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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

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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.

Intimations

Debts and Lessons

1. *My Mother*

Energy, vitality, charisma. The source: an undimmed childishness. Which I share.

2. *My Father*

A readiness to admit failure and weakness. An acceptance of guilt.

3. *Ben*

Good humor. The family energy combined with a performer's desire to waste nothing, to turn all gifts outwards.

4. *Luke*

A homemade spirituality. Love of nature and faith in all natural things—including death. An internal clock that pays no mind to the time of the world.

5. *Mr. Rainbow*

In his classroom, what was on your desk, in front of you, was yours to perfect. To do as well as you were able. Handwriting—even back then, a dead art—was to be taken as seriously as spelling, as math, as memorizing the events of 1066. Joy and rigor were the same thing: if the whole choir was to get the benefit of “Bali Ha’i” it would be by way of a martial attention to each part of the whole. There was nowhere to hide in that choir. And no pride to be taken in the fact that we, “the singers,” were removed from the school as a whole every Tuesday afternoon and presented with this task. There was nothing special about us to be found in that fact, not

even when, months later, we sang “Bali Ha’i” perfectly, just as he had trained us to do. Yes, we sang it well; the song was beautiful. We owed it to the song.

6. *Darren*

That prejudice is most dangerous not when it resides in individual hearts and minds but when it is preserved in systems. For example: an educational system that proves unable to see a boy as a child, seeing him only as a potential threat. That any child who enters such a prejudiced system will be in grave danger. Be he ever so beautiful and talented, inspired and inspirational, loving and loved—he can still be broken.

7. *Kibibi*

How to dance. How to make yourself up from scraps—from whatever is available. How to be continually surprised by small things, like the spring of a jack-in-the-box, your most treasured

toy. Here he comes! Here he comes! And therefore: how never to be cynical.

8. *Kellas*

To consider yourself lucky, even in situations which almost anybody else would consider extremely difficult and unfair. To think, reflexively, of whoever suffers. To forgive anyone who has wounded you, no matter how badly, especially if there is any sign whatsoever that a person has, in wounding you, also wounded themselves. To make no hierarchical distinction between people. To tell any story just as it happened, only exaggerating for humor, but never lying, and never trying to give yourself the flattering role.

9. *Christine*

That the diaspora included me. Sistahood.

10. *Muhammad Ali*

"No Vietcong ever called me nigger."
Therefore: solidarity.

11. *Pablo*

A thirteen-year-old, avant-garde painter appeared in school, very unlike the other boys. Out. Unafraid. From Argentina. The most recent immigrant in a school of many immigrants. He needed a model for a nude, which, in the execution, turned out to be abstract: circles and triangles. You couldn't tell it was me, but we recognized each other. The picture was marginal, he was marginal, I was marginal. How to delight in a margin.

12. *Lorraine Hansberry*

"When you starts measuring somebody, measure him *right*, child, measure him right."
Therefore: compassion.

13. *Jenny, Drama Teacher*

A task is in front of you. It is not as glorious as you had imagined or hoped. (In this case, it is not the West End, it is not Broadway, it is a small black box stapled to an ugly

comprehensive school.) But it is the task in front of you. Delight in it. The more absurd and tiny it is, the more care and dedication it deserves. Large, sensible projects require far less belief. People who dedicate themselves to unimportant things will sometimes be blind to the formal borders that are placed around the important world. They might see teenagers as people. They will make themselves absurd to the important world. Mistakes will be made. Appropriate measures will be pursued. The border between the important and the unimportant will be painfully reestablished. But the magic to be found in the black box will never be forgotten by any who entered it.

14. *Zora Neale Hurston*

Just: *brass balls*. Although that's somebody else's language. The importance of finding your own language. *Brass titties?*

15. *Tracy Chapman*

"All that you have is your soul." Therefore: liberty.

16. *Hannah*

Everyday goodness, care, attention, in the form of friendship, daughtership, mothership, siblingship. When did Hannah ever make anyone feel bad?

17. *Daisy*

Practical morality. A calendar filled with every birthday, every anniversary. Nothing put off till tomorrow. No love abstracted, instead everything made concrete and demonstrated. Memory and memorialization as an act of love, completed on behalf of all the other people less organized, less able to remember, and therefore grateful for the prompt. The value of being that person who remembers the childhoods of others better than they themselves recall them, and takes it upon themselves to preserve said

childhoods for safekeeping. Sending an old friend's childhood back to them at the very moment they are most in need of it.

18. *Zulfi*

To have one layer of skin less than the others, and therefore to feel it all: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the abject. Not only to make art but in some sense to live it.

19. *Virginia Woolf*

To replace that missing layer of skin with language. For as long as that works.

20. *Mags*

Delirium, delight, youth, sunshine, love letters, love songs. "Love me," sang the Cardigans, "fool me," and we did both—it was all we had to do. It is possible to grow disdainful of love songs of this type. But never to entirely forget what it was to hear truth in banal pop lyrics.

21. *Nick*

How to love. How to give. How to grow up. Laughter as a peace offering. Courage. (All intimations still in progress.)

22. *Devorah*

To make use of your missing layer at all times in all things. To read every line of a book with the same sense of involvement and culpability as if you had written it yourself. And, conversely, to write your own sentences as if you had no more ownership over the lines than a stranger. To be never finished thinking, because everything is as infinite as God. To know there is a metaphysics of everything.

23. *Darryl*

History as the antidote to dogma. Identity as area of interest, as the form in which you've chosen to expend your love—and your commitment.

24. *Dave*

As improbable as it often seems, it *is* possible to act. To lead. To use your imagination to build practical structures that will in some form improve the lives of the people who enter them. Paranoia about action—and the motivations for action—is the sickly indulgence of intellectuals and philosophers. The truth is that some people have a gift for action. In some people this gift is outsized, disproportionate, extraordinary to witness.

25. *Carol*

When in the presence of a child, get on the floor. Or else bend down until your own and the child's eyes meet. Mothering is an art. Housekeeping is an art. Gardening is an art. Baking is an art. Those of us who have no natural gifts in these areas—or perhaps no interest—too easily dismiss them. Making small talk is an art, and never to be despised just because you yourself dread making it. Knowing

all your neighbors' names is an art. Sending cards at holidays, to everybody you know—this, too, is an art. But above all these: playing. The tales of adult women who still know how to play with children—these should be honored. Collected in a history book, like Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Instead, their grandchildren remember.

26. *Contingency*

That I was born when I was born, where I was born—a case of relative historical luck. That I grew up in a moment of social, religious and national transition. That my school still sang the Anglican hymns, at least for a little while, so that the ancient diction of my country came to me while very young, and fruitfully mixed with the sounds of my heritage. That the tail end of one thing and the beginning of another were both visible and equally interesting to me. Milton and Monie Love. *Hill and gully rider, hill and gully!* Keats and Monty Python. *And*

did those feet in ancient time? Kafka and Prince.
Yellow bird, up high in banana tree. Twelfth
Night and Desmond's. Malcolm X and Aneurin
Bevan. Oscar Wilde and James Baldwin.
“Pump Up the Jam.” Peter Cook and Tupac.
Queen Latifah and Vita Sackville-West. That
there were so many voices in the streets. That
such complex convergences were my earliest
knowledge of the world. That no one interfered
with me, sexually, as a child. That my father
was dull and steady and did not drink, due to a
weak kidney. That my own love of alcohol and
all forms of mood transformers and enhancers
for some reason never became excessive. That
my mother had no hatred for her own skin,
hair, nose, backside, nor any part of her. That
my family was essentially matriarchal. That I
was considered “ugly” young and “beautiful”
later. That by the time the external opinion
changed it was too late to create any real change
in me. That the kinds of women I admired
in childhood were all from what Toni Cade

Bambara called the championship tradition:
Neneh, George Eliot, Madonna, Katharine
Hepburn, Grace Jones, Salt, Pepa, Lil' Kim,
Joan Armatrading, Angela Davis, Elizabeth I.
That my fear is stronger than my desire—
including my desire to self-harm. That my
grandfathers—one a violent alcoholic, the other
a destroyer of women—were both unknown
to me. That my brothers were a delight to me,
from the first. That I was an oldest child, with
all the shameful obliviousness that implies. That
I met a human whose love has allowed me not
to apply for love too often through my work—
even when we've hurt each other desperately.
That my children know the truth about me but
still tolerate me, so far. That my physical and
moral cowardice have never really been tested,
until now.

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