

“Ghosts and Empties”

--Lauren Groff

Lauren Groff received the 2018-19 Story Prize for the short-story collection *Florida*. Her new novel, *Matrix*, was published in September, 2021. The story that follows was published in the print edition of the July 20, 2015, issue of *The New Yorker*.

1 I have somehow become a woman who yells, and, because I do not want to be a woman who yells, whose little children walk around with frozen, watchful faces, I have taken to lacing on my running shoes after dinner and going out into the twilight streets for a walk, leaving the undressing and sluicing and reading and singing and tucking in of the boys to my husband, a man who does not yell.

2 The neighborhood goes dark as I walk, and a second neighborhood unrolls atop the daytime one. We have few street lights, and those I pass under make my shadow frolic; it lags behind me, gallops to my feet, gambols on ahead. The only other illumination is from the windows in the houses I pass and the moon that orders me to look up, look up! Feral cats dart underfoot, bird-of-paradise flowers poke out of the shadows, smells are exhaled into the air: oak dust, slime mold, camphor.

3 Northern Florida is cold in January and I walk fast for warmth but also because, although the neighborhood is antique—huge Victorian houses radiating outward into nineteen-twenties bungalows, then mid-century modern ranches at the edges—it’s imperfectly safe. There was a rape a month ago, a jogger in her fifties pulled into the azaleas; and, a week ago, a pack of loose pit bulls ran down a mother with a baby in her stroller and mauled both, though not to death. It’s not the dogs’ fault, it’s the owners’ fault! dog-lovers shouted on the neighborhood e-mail list, and it’s true, it was the owners’ fault, but also those dogs were sociopaths. When the suburbs were built, in the seventies, the historic houses in the center of the town were abandoned to graduate students who heated beans over Bunsen burners on the heart-pine floors and sliced apartments out of ballrooms. When neglect and humidity caused the houses to rot and droop and develop rusty scales, there was a second abandonment, to poor people, squatters. We moved here ten years ago because our house was cheap and had virgin-lumber bones, and because I decided that if I had to live in the South, with its boiled peanuts and its Spanish moss dangling like armpit hair, at least I wouldn’t barricade myself with my whiteness in a gated community. Isn’t it . . . dicey? people our parents’ age would say, grimacing, when we told them where we lived, and it took all my will power not to say, Do you mean black, or just poor? Because it was both.

4 White middle-classness has since infected the neighborhood, though, and now everything is frenzied with renovation. In the past few years the black people have mostly withdrawn. The homeless stayed for a while, because our neighborhood abuts Bo Diddley Plaza, where, until recently, churches handed out

food and God, and where Occupy rolled in like a tide and claimed the right to sleep there, then grew tired of being dirty and rolled out, leaving behind a human flotsam of homeless in sleeping bags. During our first months in the house, we hosted a homeless couple we only ever saw slinking off in the dawn: at dusk, they would silently lift off the latticework to the crawl space under our house and then sleep there, their roof our bedroom floor, and when we got up in the middle of the night we tried to walk softly because it felt rude to step inches above the face of a dreaming person.

5 On my nighttime walks the neighbors' lives reveal themselves, the lit windows domestic aquariums. At times, I'm the silent witness to fights that look like slow-dancing without music. It is astonishing how people live, the messes they sustain, the delicious whiffs of cooking that carry to the street, the holiday decorations that slowly seep into daily décor. All January, I watched a Christmas bouquet of roses on one mantel diminish until the flowers were a blighted shrivel and the water green scum, a huge Santa on a stick still beaming merrily out of the ruins. Window after window nears, freezes with its blue fog of television light or its couple hunched over a supper of pizza, holds as I pass, then slides into the forgotten. I think of the way water gathers as it slips down an icicle's length, pauses to build its glossy drop, becomes too fat to hang on, plummets down.

6 There is one mostly windowless place in the neighborhood, a yellow brick monstrosity that I love nevertheless, because it houses nuns. There used to be six nuns there, but attrition happened, as it does with very old ladies, and now there are only three kindly sisters squeaking around that immense space in their sensible shoes. A Realtor friend told us that when it was built, in the nineteen-fifties, a bomb shelter was lowered into the porous limestone of the back yard, and during sleepless nights, when my body is in bed but my brain is still out walking in the dark, I like to imagine the nuns in full regalia in their shelter, singing hymns and spinning on a stationary bike to keep the light bulb sputtering on, while, aboveground, all has been blasted black and rusted hinges rasp the wind.

7 Because the nights are so cold, I share the streets with few people. There's a young couple who jog at a pace slightly slower than my fast walk. I follow them, listening to their patter of wedding plans and fights with friends. Once I forgot myself and laughed at something they said and their faces owled, unnerved, back at me, then they trotted faster and took the first turn they found and I let them disappear into the black.

8 There's an elegant, tall woman who walks a Great Dane the color of dryer lint; I am afraid that the woman is unwell because she walks rigidly, her face pulsing as if intermittently electrified by pain. I sometimes imagine how, should I barrel around a corner to find her slumped on the ground, I would drape her over her dog, smack his withers, and watch as he, with his great dignity, carried her home.

9 There is a boy of fifteen or so, tremendously fat, whose shirt is always off and who is always on the treadmill on his glassed-in porch. No matter how many times I find myself sailing past his window, there he is, his footsteps pounding so hard I can hear them from two blocks away. Because all the lights are on, to him there is nothing beyond the black in the window, and I wonder if he watches his reflection the way I watch him, if he sees how with each step his stomach ripples as if it were a pond into which someone had tossed a fist-size stone.

10 There's the shy muttering homeless lady, a collector of cans, who hoists her clanging bags on the back of her bicycle and uses the old carriage blocks in front of the grander houses to mount her ride; the waft of her makes me think of the wealthy Southern dames in dark silk who once used those blocks to climb into their carriages, emitting a similarly intimate feminine smell.

11 There's the man who hisses nasties as he stands under the light outside a bodega with bars over its windows. I put on my don't-fuck-with-me face, and he has yet to do more than hiss, but there is a part of me that is more than ready, that wants to use what's building up.

12 Sometimes I think I see the stealthy couple who lived under our house, the particular angle of his solicitousness, his hand on her back, but when I come closer it is only a papaya tree bent over a rain barrel or two boys smoking in the bushes, who turn wary as I pass.

13 And then there's the therapist who every night sits at his desk in the study of his Victorian, which looks like a rotting galleon. He was caught in bed with the wife of one of his patients; the patient had a loaded shotgun out in the car. The wife died in coitus and the therapist survived with a bullet still in his hip, which makes him lurch when he gets up to pour himself more Scotch. There are rumors that he visits the cuckolded murderer in prison every week, though whether his motive is kindness or crowing remains in the shadows, as if motives could ever be pure. My husband and I had just moved in when the murder occurred; we were scraping rotting paint off the oak moldings in our dining room when the gunshots splattered the air, but of course we believed they were fireworks lit by the kids who lived a few houses down.

14 As I walk, I see strangers but also people I know. I look up in the beginning of February to see a close friend in a pink leotard in her window, stretching, but then, with a zip of understanding, I realize that she isn't stretching, she is drying her legs, and the leotard is in fact her body, pinked from the hot shower. Even though I visited her in the hospital when both of her boys were born, held the newborns in my arms when they still smelled of her, saw the raw Cesarean split, it isn't until I watch her drying herself that I understand that she is a sexual being, and then the next time we speak I can't help but blush and endure images of her in extreme sexual positions. Mostly, however, I see the mothers I know in

glimpses, bent like shepherdess crooks, scanning the floor for tiny Legos or half-chewed grapes or the people they once were slumped in the corners.

15 It's too much, it's too much, I shout at my husband some nights when I come home, and he looks at me, afraid, this giant gentle man, and sits up in bed over his computer and says, softly, I don't think you've walked it off yet, sweets, you may want to take one more loop. I go out again, furious, because the streets become more dangerous this late at night, and how dare he suggest risk like this to me, when I have proved myself vulnerable; but, then again, perhaps my warm house has become more dangerous as well. During the day, while my sons are in school, I can't stop reading about the disaster of the world, the glaciers dying like living creatures, the great Pacific trash gyre, the hundreds of unrecorded deaths of species, millennia snuffed out as if they were not precious. I read and savagely mourn, as if reading could somehow sate this hunger for grief, instead of what it does, which is fuel it.

16 I have mostly stopped caring where I walk, but I try to be at the Duck Pond every night when the Christmas lights, forgotten for weeks now, click off and the pond erupts, the frogs launching into their syncopated song like a nursery school let loose in a room of untuned lutes. Our pair of black swans would shout at the frogs with their brass voices as if to shut them up, but, outnumbered, the birds would soon give up and climb the island in the center of the pond and twine their necks together to sleep. The swans had four cygnets last spring, sweet cheeping puffs that were the delight of my little boys, who tossed dog food at them every day, until one morning, while the swans were distracted by our food, one cygnet gave a choked peep, bobbed, then went down; it came up again but across the pond, in the paws of an otter that ate it in small bites, floating serenely on its back. The otter got one more cygnet before the wildlife service arrived to scoop up the remaining two, but it was later reported in the neighborhood newsletter that the tiny swan hearts had given out in fear. The parent swans floated for months, inconsolable, though perhaps this is a projection, for, since they are both black swans and parents, they are already prefeathered in mourning.

17 On Valentine's Day, I see red and white lights flashing from afar at the nunnery and walk faster in the hope that the nuns are having a love party, a disco rager, but instead I see an ambulance drive away, and the next day my fears are confirmed: the nuns have been further diminished, to two. Withholding erotic pleasure for the glory of God seems an anachronism in our age of pleasure, and, with their frailty and the hugeness of the house they rattle around in, it has been decided that the remaining nuns must decamp. I come to watch them the night they leave, expecting a moving truck, but there are only a few leather suitcases and a box or two in the back of the nuns' station wagon. Their wrinkled faces droop with relief as they drive off.

- 18 The cold lingers on into March. It has been a hard winter for everyone, though not as terrible as in the North, and I think of my friends and family up there with their dirty walls of snow and try to remember that the camellias and peach trees and dogwoods and oranges are all abloom here, even in the dark. I smell the jasmine potent in my hair the next morning, the way I used to smell cigarette smoke and sweat after going to a night club, back when I was young and could do such unthinkable things. There is a vernacular style of architecture, called Cracker, which is not meant to cause offense, all porches and high ceilings; and by the middle of March one of the oldest Cracker houses in north-central Florida is being renovated. The façade is preserved, but the rest is gutted. Night by night, I see what remains of the house as daily it is stripped away, until one night the house has entirely vanished: that morning it collapsed on a worker, who survived, like Buster Keaton, by standing in the window as the structure fell. I study the hole where a humble and unremarked history stood for so long, a house that watched the town press up, then grow around it, and I think of the construction worker who walked out of the collapse unhurt, what he was imagining. I think I know. One night just before Christmas I came home late after a walk and my husband was in the bathroom and I flipped open his computer and saw what I saw there, a conversation not meant for me, a snip of flesh that was not his, and without letting him know I was in the house I about-faced and went out again and walked until it was too cold to walk, until just before dawn, when the dew could easily have been ice.
- 19 Now, while I stand before the collapsed house, the woman with the Great Dane slides by through the dark, and I notice how aggressively pale she has become, so skinny her cheeks must touch inside her mouth, her wig askew to show a rind of scalp above the bangs. If she, in turn, notices the particular dark spike of my unrest, she says only a soft good night and her dog looks at me with a kind of human compassion, and together they move off, stately and gentle, into the black.
- 20 Most changes are not so swift as the fallen house, and I notice how much weight the boy in his glassed-in sunporch has lost only when I realize from the sound of his footsteps that he's no longer walking on his treadmill but running, and I look at him closely for the first time in a long time, my dear flabby friend whom I took for granted, and see a transformation so astonishing it's as if a maiden had turned into a birch tree or a stream. During these few months this overweight child has turned into a slender man with pectoral rosebuds on his chest, sweating, smiling at himself in the glass, and I yelp aloud because of the swiftness of youth, these gorgeous changes that insist that not everything is decaying faster than we can love it.
- 21 I walk on and as the boy's trotting noises fade I keep hearing a disquieting constant sound that I can't place. It is a sticky night: I shed my jacket last week, and it is only gradually that I understand that the noise is coming from the first air-conditioner turned on for the year. Soon they'll all be on, crouched like trolls under

the windows, their collective tuneless hum drowning out the night birds and frogs, and time will leap forward and the night will grow more and more reluctant to descend and, in the cool linger of twilight, people longing for real air after the sickly fake cold all day will come out and I will no longer have my dangerous dark streets to myself. There's a pleasant smell like campfires in the air, and I think that the old turpentine-pine forests that ring the city must be on fire, which happens once a year or so, and I wonder about all those poor birds seared out of their sleep and into the disorienting darkness. I discover the next morning that it was worse, a controlled burn over the acres where dozens of the homeless had been living in a tent city, and I walk down to look, but it's all great oaks, lonely and blackened from the waist down in a plain of steaming charcoal. When I return and see the six-foot fences around Bo Diddley Plaza which had gone up that same night for construction, or so the signs say, it is clear that it is part of a larger plan, balletically executed. I stand squinting in the daylight wanting to yell, looking to find a displaced person. Please, I think, please let my couple come by, let me see their faces at last, let me take their arms. I want to make them sandwiches and give them blankets and tell them that it's O.K., that they can live under my house. I'm glad I can't find anyone later, when I remember that it is not a kind thing to tell human beings that they can live under your house.

22 The week of heat proves temporary, a false start to the season. The weather again turns so clammy and cold that nobody else comes out and I shiver as I walk until I escape my chill by going into the drugstore for Epsom salts to soak my walking away. It is astonishing to enter the dazzling color, the ferocious heat after the chilly gray scale; to travel hundreds of miles over the cracked sidewalk and sparse palmetto and black path-crossing cats I dart away from, into this abundance with its aisles of gaudy trash and useless wrapping and plastic pull tabs that will one day end up in the throat of the earth's last sea turtle. I find myself limping and the limp morphs into a kind of pained bopping because the music dredges up elementary school, when my parents were, astonishingly, younger than I am now, and that one long summer they listened on repeat to Paul Simon singing over springy African drums about a trip with a son, the human trampoline, the window in the heart; and it is both too much and too little and I leave without the salts because I am not ready for such easy absolution as this. I can't.

23 And so I walk and I walk and at some point, near the wildly singing frogs, I look up and out of the darkness, a stun: the new possessor of the old nunnery has installed uplighting, not on the aesthetic blank of the cube but, rather, on the ardent live oak in front of it, so old and so broad it spreads out over a half acre. I've always known the tree was there, and my children have often swung on its low branches and from the bark plucked out ferns and epiphytes with which to adorn my head. But it has never before announced itself fully as the colossus it is, with its branches that are so heavy they grow toward the ground then touch and grow upward again;

and thus, elbowing itself up, it brings to mind a woman at the kitchen table, knuckling her chin and dreaming. I stand shocked by its beauty, and, as I look, I imagine the swans on their island seeing the bright spark in the night and feeling their swan hearts moved. I heard that they have started building a nest again, though how they can bear it after all they've lost I do not know.

24 I hope they understand, my sons, both now and in the future just materializing in the dark, that all these hours their mother has been walking so swiftly away from them I have not been gone, that my spirit, hours ago, slipped back into the house and crept into the room where their early-rising father had already fallen asleep, usually before 8 p.m., and that I touched this gentle man whom I love so desperately and somehow fear so much, touched him on the pulse in his temple and felt his dreams, which are too distant for the likes of me, and I climbed the creaking old stairs and at the top split in two and, heading right and left into separate rooms, slid through the crack under the doors and curled myself on the pillows to breathe into me the breath my boys breathed out. Every pause between the end of one breath and the beginning of the next is long; then again, nothing is not always in transition. Soon, tomorrow, the boys will be men, then the men will leave the house, and my husband and I will look at each other crouching under the weight of all that we wouldn't or couldn't yell, and all those hours outside walking, my body, my shadow, and the moon. It is terribly true, even if the truth does not comfort, that if you look at the moon for long enough night after night, as I have, you will see that the old cartoons are correct, that the moon is, in fact, laughing, but not at us, we who are too small and our lives too fleeting for it to give us any notice at all. ♦