

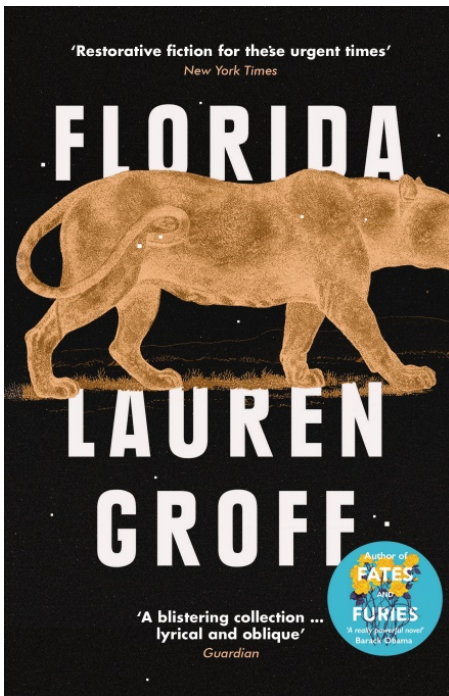


EXTRACTS

## Eyewall by Lauren Groff

'One bottle cost a year of retirement, or an hour squinting down the barrel of a hurricane.' Enjoy a short story entitled *Eyewall* from *Florida*, the absorbing new book from *Fates and Furies* author Lauren Groff

06 JUNE 2018

[BUY THE BOOK](#)

## Eyewall

It began with the chickens. They were Rhode Island Reds and I'd raised them from chicks. Though I called until my voice gave out, they'd huddled in the darkness under the house, a dim mass faintly pulsing. Fine, you ungrateful turds! I'd said before abandoning them to the storm. I stood in the kitchen at the one window I'd left unboarded and watched the hurricane's bruise spreading in the west. I felt the chickens' fear rising through the floorboards to pass through me like prayers.

We waited. The weatherman on the television repeated the swirl of the hurricane with his body like a valiant but inept mime. All the other creatures of the earth flattened

themselves, dug in. I stood in my window watching, a captain at the wheel, as the first gust filled the oaks on the far side of the lake and raced across the water. It shivered my lawn, my garden, sent the unplucked zucchini swinging like church bells. And then the windsmacked the house. Bring it on! I shouted. Or, just maybe, this is another thing in my absurd life that I whispered.

At first, though, little happened. The lake goosebumped; I might have been looking at the sensitive flesh of an enormous lizard. The swing in the oak made larger arcs over the water. The palmettos nodded, accepting the dance.

The wine I had been drinking was very good. I opened another bottle. It had been left in a special cooler in the butler's pantry that had been designed to replicate precisely the earthy damp of the caves under Bourgogne. One bottle cost a year of retirement, or an hour squinting down the barrel of a hurricane.

My neighbor's jeep kicked up hillocks of pale dust on the road. He saw me standing in the window and skidded to a halt. He rolled down his own window and shouted, and his face squared into his neck, which was the warm hue of a brick. But the wind now was so loud that his voice was lost, and I felt a surge of affection for him as he leaned out the window, gesticulating. We'd had a moment a few years back at a Conservation Trust benefit just after my husband left, our fortyish bodies both stuffed into finery. There was the taste of whiskey and the weirdness of his moustache against my teeth. Now I toasted him with my glass, and he shouted so hard he turned purple, and his hunting dog stuck her head out the back window and began to howl. I raised two fingers and calmly gave him a pope's blessing. He bulged, affronted, and rolled up his window. He made a gesture as if wadding up a hunk of paper and tossing it behind his shoulder, and then he pulled away to join the last stragglers pushing north as fast as their engines could strain. The great rag of the storm would wipe them off the road. I'd hear of the way my neighbor's jeep, going a hundred miles per hour, lovingly kissed the concrete riser of an overpass. His dog would land clear over the six lanes in the southbound culvert and dig herself down. When the night passed and the day dawned calm, she'd pull herself to the road and find herself the sole miraculous survivor of a mile-long flesh-and-metal sandwich.

I began to sing to myself, songs from childhood, songs with lyrics I didn't understand then and still don't, folk songs and commercial jingles and the Hungarian lullaby my father sang during my many sleepless nights when I was small. I was a high-strung, beetle-browed girl, and the songs only made me want to stay awake longer, to outlast him until he fell asleep crookedly against my headboard and I could watch the way his dreams moved beneath his handsome face. Enervated and watchful in school the next day, I'd be unable to follow the teacher's voice, the ropes of her sentences as she led us through history or English or math,

and I would fill my notebooks with drawings—hundred different houses, floors and windows and doors. All day I'd furiously scribble. If I only drew the right place to hold me, I could escape from the killing hours of school and draw myself all the way safely home.

The house sucked in a shuddery breath, and the plywood groaned as the windows drew inward. Darkness fell over the world outside. Rain unleashed itself. It was neither freight train nor jet engine nor cataract crashing around me but, rather, everything. The roof roared with water, the window blurred. When the storm cleared, I saw a branch the size of a locomotive cracking off the heritage oak by the lake and falling languorously down, the wet moss floating outstretched like useless dark wings.

I felt, rather than saw, the power go out. Time erased itself from the appliances and the lights winked shut. The house went sinister behind me, oppressive with its dark humidity. When I turned, I saw my husband in the far doorway.

You're drinking my wine, he said. I could hear him perfectly, despite the storm. He was a stumpy man, thirty years older than me. I could smell the mint sprigs he chewed and the skin ointment for his psoriasis.

I didn't think you'd mind, I said. You don't need it anymore.

He put both hands over his chest and smiled. A week after he left me, his heart broke itself apart. He was in bed with his mistress. She was so preposterously young that I assumed they conversed in baby talk. He hadn't wanted children until he ended up fucking one. I was glad that she was the one who'd had to be stuck under his moist and cooling body, the one to shout his name and have it go unanswered.

He came closer and stood next to me in the window. I went very still, as I always did near him. We watched the world on its bender outside. My beautiful tomatoes had flattened and the metal cages minced away across the lawn, as if ghosts were wearing them as hoop skirts.

You're still here, of course, he said. Even though they told you to get out days ago.

This house is old, I said. It has lived through other storms.

You never listen to anyone, he said. Have some wine, I said. Stand with me. Watch the show. But for God's sake, shut it.

He looked at me deeply. He had huge brown eyes that were young no matter how alligatored his skin got. His eyes were what had made me fall for him. He was a very good poet. The night I met him, I sat spellbound at a reading my friend had dragged me to, his words softening the ground of me, so that when he looked up, those brown eyes could tunnel all the way through.

He drank a swig of wine and moaned in appreciation. At its peak, he said. Perfection. Drink it now.

I plan to, I said.

He began to go vague on me. I knew his poems were no good when they began to go vague. How's my reputation? he said, the fingers of his hands melding into mittens. I was his literary executor; he hadn't had time to change that one last thing.

I'm letting it languish, I said.

Ah, he said. La belle dame sans merci.

I don't speak Italian, I said.

French, he said.

Oh, dear, I said. My ignorance must have been so maddening.

Honey, he said, you don't know the half of it.

Well, I said. I do know my half.

I didn't say, I had never said: Lord, how I longed for a version of you I could hold, entire, in my arms.

He winked at me, and the mint smell intensified, and there was a pressure on my mouth, then a lessening. And then it was only the storm and the house and me.

The darkness redoubled, the sound intensified. There were pulsing navy veins within the clouds; I remembered a hunting trip with my husband once, the buck's organs gutted onto the ground. The camphor and magnolia and crape myrtles pressed their crowns to the earth, backbending, acrobats. My teak picnic table galumphed itself toward the road, chasing after

the chairs already fled that way.

“

**The house sucked in a shuddery breath, and the plywood groaned as the windows drew inward. Darkness fell over the world outside. Rain unleashed itself.**

My best laying hen was scraped from under the house and slid in a horrifying diagonal across the window. For a moment, we were eye to lizardy eye. I took a breath. The glass fogged, and when it cleared, my hen had blown away. Then the top layer of the lake seemed to rise in one great sheet and crush itself against the house. When the wind swept the water into the road, my garden became a pit in which a gar twisted and a baby alligator dug furiously into the mud. From behind the flattened blueberries, a nightmare creature of mud stood and leaned against the wind. It showed itself to be a man only moments before the wind picked him up and slammed him into the door. I didn't think before I ran and heaved it open so the man could tumble in. I was blown off my feet and had to clutch the doorknob to keep from flying. The wind seized a flowerpot and smashed it through the microwave. The man crawled and helped me push the door until at last it closed and the storm was banished, howling to find itself outside again.

The man was mudstruck, naked, laughing. A gold curl emerged from the filth of his head, and I wiped his face with the hem of my dress until I saw that he was my college boyfriend. I sat down on the floor beside him, scrabbling the dirt from him with my fingernails until I could make him out in his entirety.

Oh! he shouted when he could speak. He'd always been a cheery boy, talkative and loving. He clutched my face between his hands and said, You're old! You're old! You should wear the bottoms of your trousers rolled. I don't wear trousers, I said, and snatched my head away. There was still water in the pipes, and I washed him until he was clean. He fashioned a loincloth out of a kitchen towel. He kept his head turned from me, staring at me from the corners of his eyes until I took his chin in my fingers and turned it. There it was, the wet rose

blossoming above his ear. He took a long swallow of wine, and I watched a red ligament move over the bone.

So you really did it, I said.

A friend of a friend of a friend had told me something: Calgary, the worst motel he could find, the family's antique dueling pistol. But I didn't trust either the friend or the friend of the friend, certainly not the friend to the third power, and this act seemed so out of character for such a vivid soul that I decided it couldn't possibly have been true.

It's so strange, I said. You were always the happiest person I knew. You were so happy I had to break up with you.

He cocked his head and pulled me into his lap. Happy, eh? he said.

I rested against his thin young chest. I thought of how I had been so tired after two years of him, how I couldn't bear the three a.m. phone calls when he had to read me a passage from Benjamin, the Saturdays when I had to search for him in bars or find him in strangers' living rooms, how, if I had to make one more goddamn egg sandwich to fill his mouth and quiet him and make him fall asleep at dawn, I would shatter into fragments myself. Our last month was in Spain. I had sold one of my ovaries to get us there, and lost him in Barcelona. For an hour, I wept at the center of a knot of concerned Spaniards until he came loping down the street toward me, some stranger's stolen Afghan hound tugging at the leash in his hand. A light had been kindled in his eye; it blazed before him, a herald announcing his peculiar self. I looked up at him in the dim of the stormstruck house, the hole in the side of his head.

He smiled, expectant, brushing my knuckles with his lips. I said, Oh.

Bygones, he said. He downed half of the bottle of wine as if it were a plastic cup of beer. A swarm of palmetto bugs burst up through the air-conditioning vent and paraded by in single file, giving the impression of politeness. I could feel the thinness of the towel between his skin and my legs, the way this beautiful boy had always stirred me.

My God, I loved you, I said. I had played it close to my chest then; I had thought not telling him was the source of my power over him.

Also bygones, he said. Now tell me what you're doing here.

The rowboat skipped over the lake, wagging its oars like swimmers' arms. It launched itself into the trunks of the oaks and pinned itself there. I saw the glass of the window beating, darkness so deep in it that I could see myself, gray at the temples, lined from nostril to lip. The house felt cavernous around me. I had thought it would be full by now: of husband, of small voices, at the very least of chickens.

Do you remember our children? I asked.

He beamed. Clothilde, he said. Rupert. Haricot and Abricot, the twins. Dodie. Australopithecus. And Dirk. All prodigies, with your brains and my looks.

You forgot Cleanth, I said.

My favorite! he said. How could I have forgotten? Maker of crossword puzzles, National Spelling Bee champion. Good old Cleanth.

He lifted the back of my hand to his lips and kissed it.

It's too bad, he murmured.

Before I could ask what was too bad, the window imploded, showering us with glass. The wind reached in and sucked him out. I clutched at the countertops and saw my beautiful boy swan-dive into the three-foot-deep pond that had been my yard. He turned on his back and did a few strokes. Then he imitated one of my dead chickens floating about in the water, her two wings cocked skyward in imprecation. Like synchronized swimmers, they swirled about each other, arms to the sky, and then, in a gulp, both sank.

I tucked two bottles and a corkscrew into my sleeves and pulled myself to the doorway against the tug of the wind. I could barely walk when I was through. The house heaved around me and the wind followed, overturning clocks and chairs, paging through the sheet music on the piano before snatching it up and carrying it away. It riffled through my books one by one as if searching for marginalia, then toppled the bookshelves. The water pushed upward from under the house, through the floorcracks, through the vents, turning my rugs into marshes. Rats scampered up the stairs to my bedroom. I trudged over the mess and crawled up, step by step, on my hands and knees. A terrapin passed me, then a raccoon with a baby clutched to its back, gazing at me with wide robber's eyes. Peekaboo, I said, and it hid

its face in its mother's ruff. In the light of a battery-powered alarm clock, I saw rats, a snake, a possum, a heap of bugs scattered across the room, as if gathered for a slumber party, all those gleaming eyes in the dark. The bathroom was the sole windowless place at the heart of the house, and when I was inside, I locked them all out.

I sat in the bathtub, loving its cool embrace of my body. I have always felt a sisterhood with bathtubs; without someone else within us, we are smooth white cups of nothing. It was thick black in the bathroom, sealed tight. The house twisted and shook; above, the roof peeled itself slowly apart. The wind played the chimney until the whole place wheezed like a bagpipe. I savored each sip of wine and wondered what the end would be: the roof gone and the storm galloping in; the house tilting on its risers and rolling me out; a water moccasin crawling up the pipes and finding a warm place to nest between my legs.

Above the scream of the storm, there came the hiss and sputter of a wet match. Then a weak flame licked brightly near the toilet and went out. There rose in its place the sweet smell of pipe smoke.

Jesus Christ, I said.

No. Your father, he said in his soft accent. He had a smile in his voice when he said, Watch your language, my love.

I felt him near, sitting at the edge of the bathtub as if it were the side of a bed. I felt his hand brushing the wet hair out of my mouth. I lifted my own hand and caught his, feeling the sop of his flesh against the fragile bone. I was glad it was dark. He'd been eaten from the inside by cancer. My mother, after too many gin and tonics, always turned cruel. She had once described my father's end to me. The last few days, she'd said, he was a sack of swollen flesh.

I hadn't been there. I didn't even know he was sick. I'd been sent to Girl Scout camp. While he slowly died, I learned how to tie knots. While he hallucinated about his village, the cherry trees, the bull in the field that bellowed at night for sex, I kissed a girl named Julia Pfeffernuss. I believed for years afterward that tongues should taste like the clovers we'd sucked for the honey at their roots. When my father was forgetting his English and shouting for his mother in Hungarian, I stole a sailboat and went alone to the quiet heart of the reservoir. Before the dam had been built, there had been a village there. I took down the sails



and dropped the anchor and dove. I opened my eyes to find myself outside a young girl's room, her brushes and combs still laid out on her vanity, me in the algaed mirror, framed by the window. I saw a catfish lying on a platter in the dining room as if serving himself up; he looked at me and shook his head and sagely swam away. I saw sheets forgotten on the line, waving upward toward the sun. I came out of the lake and climbed into the boat and tacked for camp, and didn't tell a soul what I had seen, never, not once, not even my husband, who would have made it his own.

I might have told my friends at camp, I think. I don't think I'd meant to keep the miracle to myself. But the camp's director had been waiting for me on the dock, a hungry pity pressing her lips thin, the red hood of her sweatshirt waggled in the air behind her. It stirred still, in my memory, a big and ugly tongue.

When we first saw this house on its sixty acres, I didn't fall for the heart-pine floors or the attic fan that kept the house cool all summer without air conditioning or the magnolias blooming their goblets of white light. I fell for the long swing in the heritage oak over the lake, which had thrilled some child, which was waiting for another. My husband looked at the study, mahogany-paneled, and said under his breath, Yes. I stood in the kitchen and looked at the swing, at the way the sun hit the wood so gently, the promise it held, and thought, Yes. Every day for ten years, watching the swing move expectantly in the light wind of morning, thinking, Yes, the word quietly piercing the diaphragm, that same Yes until the day my husband left, and even after he left, and then even after he died; even then, still hoping.

For a very long time, we sat there like that: my dad's hand in mine, in the roaring black. I waited for him to speak, but he had always been a man who knew how to groom the silence between people. He smoked, I drank, and the world tired itself out with its tantrum.

I lost awareness of my body. There was only the smoothness of the porcelain beneath me, the warmth of my father's hand. Time passed, endless, a breath.

Slowly, the wind softened. Sobbed. Stopped. The house trembled and moaned itself back to pitch. A trickle of dawn painted a gray strip under the door. My body returned to itself. I could hear only my heartbeat and rain off the roof when I said, Remember when you used to call your family in Hungary?

You were always so furious, he said. You would scream at me when I tried to talk. Your mother had to take you out to get ice cream every time I wanted to call.

I couldn't eat it. I just watched it melt, I said.

I know, he said.

I still can't eat it, I said. I hated that you opened your mouth and suddenly became another person.

We waited. The air felt poached, both sticky and wet.

I said, I never thought I could be so alone.

We're all alone, he said.

You had me, I said.

True, he said. He squeezed the back of my neck, kneaded the knots out.

I listened to the shifting of the world outside. This is either the eye or we've made it through, I said.

Well, he said. There will always be another storm, you know.

I stood, woozy, the bottles clanking off my body back into the bathtub. I know, I said.

You'll be A-OK, he said.

That's no wisdom coming from you, I said. Everything's all right for the dead.

When I opened the door to the bedroom, the room was blazing with light. The plywood over the windows had caught the wind like sails and carried the frames from the house. There were rectangular holes in the wall. The creatures had left the room. The storm had stripped the sheets like a good guest, and they had all blown away, save one, which hung pale and perfect over the mirror, saving myself from the sight of me.

The damage was done: three-hundred-year-old trees smashed, towns flattened as if a fist had come from the sun and twisted. My life was scattered into three counties. Someone found a novel with my bookplate in it sunning itself on top of a car in Georgia. Everywhere I looked,

the dead. A neighbor child, come through the storm, had wandered outside while the rest of the family was salvaging what remained, and had fallen into the pool and drowned. The high school basketball team, ignoring all warnings, crossed a bridge and was swallowed up by the Gulf. Old friends were carried away on the floods; others, seeing the little that remained, let their hearts break. The storm had stolen the rest of the wine and the butler's pantry, too. My chickens had drowned, blown apart, their feathers freckling the ground. For weeks, the stench of their rot would fill my dreams. Over the next month, mold would eat its way up the plaster and leave gorgeous abstract murals of sage and burnt sienna behind. But the frame had held, the doors had held. The house, in the end, had held.

On my way downstairs, I passed a congregation of exhausted armadillos on the landing. Birds had filled the Florida room, cardinals and whip-poor-wills and owls. Gently, the insects fled from my step. I sloshed over the rugs that bled their vegetable dyes onto the floorboards. My brain was too small for my skull and banged from side to side as I walked. Moving in the humidity was like forcing my way through wet silk. Still, I opened the door to look at the devastation outside.

And there I stopped, breathless. I laughed. Isn't this the fucking kicker, I said aloud. Or maybe I didn't.

Houses contain us; who can say what we contain? Out where the steps had been, balanced beside the drop-off: one egg, whole and mute, holding all the light of dawn in its skin.

