

The One Good Bite in the Saw-Grass Plant

A Chapbook of Poems

Roger Mitchell

1010 E. First St.

Bloomington, IN 47401

812-332-1045

CONTENTS

1. First Morning in the Everglades
2. Wind in the Slash Pines
3. South Florida Sunset
4. A Flight of Willets
5. Another Use For Marl
6. Seen Just Outside the Park
7. Seeing the Florida Panther
8. I Come Too Close
9. Alligators Mating: A Lawrentian Fantasy
10. Sunset Through the Pines, or, Food As Art
11. Butterflies on the Rowdy Bend Trail
12. Consider the Mangrove
13. Slough Song
14. Skimmers: A Distraction Display
15. Rain in the Swamp
16. I Go Out Into the Bay in a Kayak
17. Marl

My thanks to Alan Scott, Maureen McGee-Ballinger and Bob Merkel of the Everglades National Park for making my stay in the park lively, comfortable and informed.

Thanks, too, to the editors of OnEarth for publishing "I Come Too Close."

FIRST MORNING IN THE EVERGLADES

9:14 am, sky bright, wind steady,
saw-grass on the march.
Clouds lean forward heading north.
Two bikers pass by,
feet up,
faces into the sun.

Dragging a huge tail fin, a grackle
slides down the wind,
drops into the grass, out of sight.
Off in the distance,
a great egret pumping hard.

A car passes, going my way,
gives my car a small buffeting,
a slap on the shoulder,
like a greeting.

Somebody from Massachusetts
can't believe it either.
Weaves down the road,
eyes on the unbroken distance.

Like a whole life,
a handful of tree swallows
bursts out of the air,
and just as quick,
melts back into it.

WIND IN THE SLASH PINES

They stand apart from one another, waving,
hello or goodbye, maybe both, always
together though, hailing and waving,
across a scratch of broken pinnacle
and saw palmetto. Gar are not more slender.
In scales of cracked bark,
they face into the currents of the wind.
The sky lets out a day-long sigh
to have its back so deliciously brushed.
Even clouds come down to rest there.
Look closely, though.
All of them have walked through fire.

SOUTH FLORIDA SUNSET

All day long the sun stood off
exactly the right distance,
coming down only at dusk
to cool itself in the damp
grasses and drenched air.
All day, its fiery breath
and fierce glances bent
over us, hiding from its glare.
But in the evening, it lay
the length of its cloudy ember
down in the slash pines, briefly,
but exactly, like a tired god.

A FLIGHT OF WILLETS

The way a flight of willets picks itself up
like a sack of loose fluttering feathered sticks
and slides across the shorebreak without
ever getting more than a foot off the ground
and keeps deciding, but always changing its mind,
where to land next, and you keep thinking,
now it will land, now it will make up its mind,
since it's clear that it has one, all ninety
or a hundred together, thinking the same
watery thought that seems always about
to be runneling off but never does, a thought
it keeps having but reinventing,
carried always onto the next stretch of beach
where the crabs are fat and apparently reckless,
everyone talking and eating at the same time,
and time beginning to tick in the bones
when all of them lift higher and higher, and look,
they're gone. Again.

ANOTHER USE FOR MARL

Its capacity to console, say,
its light tones and smooth clinging texture.
Marl would stay close to you,
suck you down into it, in fact,
deck you out in whited mud,
make you, in a word, marly.
You would be down, yes,
but down where things start.
And, for that matter, end.
You could look creation
and creation's cranky relative, death,
straight in the face and say
to your former boss/girlfriend/life,
as you chewed on a stalk of saw-grass:
Muck is the stuff I come from.
Muck is my mother.
It was muck before it was dirt.
It was muck before it poked out into
the spear-headed leaf of the pickerel weed,
that sky-rocket of blue bloom,
with the wisdom to stick with the muck
rather than creep up onto the bank
with the rest of the alligators,
looking for God and a second mortgage.

SEEN JUST OUTSIDE THE PARK

Pickers in the fog at dawn
as they move down into the long rows,
empty baskets on their hips,
and start slapping the leaves.

SEEING THE FLORIDA PANTHER

It was moonless the night I saw one.
It was cloudless and starless, too.
I drove down to the end of the road,
where the road truly ends, a snaggle
of improbable rhizomes, and stood
in the cloudless starless moonless dark,
trying to breathe without breathing,
listening to every wrinkle in the air,
every bug exhale, every snake sniff.
Once, I remember, a plane passed over,
high, so high I could barely hear it.
At first I thought it might be a star
scratching a small slit in the dark.
I crouched low to the ground.
Like a rabbit in a wolf's gaze, I froze.
Nothing could see me, I thought.
They would never know I had been here,
whoever they were. I was glad
for the moonless light, glad
for my dull sand-colored coat,
my cloudless omnivorous eyes,
though I was a long way off
and beginning to disappear.
If I do, look for my shadow.
It's folded into the saw palmetto.

I COME TOO CLOSE

It knows when, the great white heron,
I come too close. Though I don't know what
it thinks I want. It would be nice
if it took my watching it
as simple praise. I do not want
the raw little racer it caught for lunch.
My diet calls for things that move
hardly at all. I would not touch
its chick, if it had one, or flash
a camera in its face. Agreed,
the space between us can't be crossed,
though when I try to narrow it
an inch or two, as now, I catch
something in the way it packs
its apparatus in a bag--
beak, legs and wings--and flaps off squawking,
annoyed, it would seem, with little man.
Who runs himself around,
but can't get off the ground.

ALLIGATORS MATING: A LAWRENTIAN FANTASY

The rushes shiver with the bellowing.
For hours, then days, the river trembles.
Everything gets out of the way, even
the water-striders, the dangling weed,
the lice in the turtle's eyelashes.
They are ferocious with a scalding
that runs the length of their bodies.
Together they must do a bidding
neither of them understands. How could they,
with skin that weighs two thousand
times more than their brains.
He whacks the water with his head.
A dragonfly stops somewhere between
events in its life. The alligator thinks
what he must do is mighty and sudden.
What she must do even a god would make
extravagant excuses to avoid.
The earth cracks at the weight of their love.
The earth opens so it can hide them.
It is secret, what they are doing,
done underwater, and involves, they say,
some tender nudging. And the eggs.
So fragile a thought could damage them.
It has taken a year for the lava
to gather and boil and only a few seconds
for it to be heaved across the seam
between Not Being and Being,
the lucky toss that fell on us, too,
astonishment that out of nothing,
a world comes, like lizard offspring,
which she must carry in her mouth
to keep the crazed male from eating them,
whose first place in the world
is behind the bars of their mother's teeth.

SUNSET THROUGH THE PINES, or, FOOD AS ART

There's a long moment, maybe twenty minutes,
when the sun falls down behind the pines
and the sky turns the color every painter
in the world has tried to copy. I'm not
a painter. Still, as a poet, I have a duty here,
despite the dog barking in the distance,
the catbird mewling beside me in a bush.
I'm sitting out on the screened porch eating
a plateful of steamed fresh pole beans, perfect
and soft green. But, wait, the sun is sliding
down the large canvas in back of the pines,
reminding me, I think, of Clyfford Still.
The green shoots crunch quietly against my teeth.
This may be the most perfect moment life
has seen fit to send my way, and I waste it
on a few tubes of photosynthesized light.
Hunger is a toad, I realize, squat and knobby,
but perhaps it wouldn't be amiss to point out
that sunset washed over these beans every day.
Maybe I did see it poorly, but I ate it wholly.

BUTTERFLIES ON THE ROWDY BEND TRAIL

Late March, humid mid afternoon.
I walk down the trail,
escorted a half mile or so
by a few hundred
Great Southern Whites
waving like tiny handkerchiefs,
goodbye or hello
to some mighty venture.
Fields of saltwort to my left,
the coast not far off.
They stop at a shaded part of the trail,
damp undercover and vine,
passion vine, pungent musk,
where a dozen zebra butterflies
float up in front of me.
Yellow slashes on their wings
imitate the laddered light of the place.
I keep walking toward the mud flats
where twice a day the tide
slides back a half mile of sea like a trap door
so the birds can eat.
There's the briny smell of it now.
Muddy ooze, where life begins.

CONSIDER THE MANGROVE

I could spend all day in among the mangrove roots.
For one thing, it's cool down here,
and I would need coolness to comprehend
the workings of so convoluted
and intersecting a set of pipes.
As though a philosopher had decided one day
to give it up and be a plumber.
Or God had decided He would mow the grass,
rather than leave it to us and the sheep,
who, frankly, do it better.
I think nature is a little silly sometimes.
Take the duck. Or the clouds.
Or, consider the way these trees
which are hardly more than bushes .
and are named, apparently, for man,
walk right off the end of the land into the sea.

SLOUGH SONG

Thin river,
imperceptible slope,
you flow so slowly,
you seem asleep.

All over your back
the saw-grass grows,
islands of mahogany,
canopies of mangroves.

Alligators nap
in the middle of a stream
as wide as Florida.
Palm trees strum.

All night long
the river slides
into your dreams,
jimmies its tides,

slipping them marl,
snail and feather,
turtle and heron,
lunge and slither.

I came here once
and listened hard.
You said nothing,
but still, I heard.

SKIMMERS: A DISTRACTION DISPLAY

I love the skimmers, though this is not about them.
I love their long heavy split-level bill.
I even love the term "lower mandible,"
which sounds like a country on the far side
of Tibet, where the last snow leopard is trying
not to be seen, which also is not what this is about.
The bill is so heavy that when they rest, they turn
their heads and lay it across their backs, or,
just drop the front end of it in the sand at their feet.
This is not about that, as I said, but to see them
slice the body of the ocean open in one stroke,
an operation from which the ocean always recovers,
is almost enough to keep me from having to mention
this, which is finally what this is about. The world
coming apart.

RAIN IN THE SWAMP

Something like wind woke me. It was still dark.
I lay there listening to it gather strength,
slowly at first, then rapidly and hard.
The rain is filling up the swamp, I said,
the shallow alligator holes, the scorched
patches of saw-grass prairie, pinnacle
that lies like broken coral on a beach.
It's not just fish that live in water. Things
that came ashore often go back, or live
where land and water come to some rough agreements.
Something in all of us wants to go back.
To a muddy bank, say. Or disappear
into some thick rushes for a day or two.
If I could, I would spend the day banking
and skimming over the tops of the mangroves
with the kites, scooping up air by the wingful,
scattering it like seed in a furrow.
Who thought that being human was enough?
Or, that it was different from the plunge
head first into a river for a fish.

I GO OUT INTO THE BAY IN A KAYAK

At low tide. There might be an inch between me
and the peninsula's marly run-off.

I couldn't be any closer to the earth
if I tried, here where it is land one hour
and sea the next. Birds blow by in clouds,
driven by the fronts. I don't know what they are,
they move so fast. They must need rest.

But there go the wings like flashing knives,
and the shadow they drag across the water.

What sort of a feast it is, or will be,
I'm not told, but I know when I've been invited.

MARL

"Look at the fields, and imagine what they might write, if they should put pen to paper." Henry David Thoreau

1.

It must have been a noise
before it was a word. Before there were
words. The gar rubbing its tail fin
on a sunken log. The croak
of one cormorant greeting another
in an overcrowded pond-apple tree.
Soft rasp of the panther's tongue
licking its paw in the dark.

Listen to it: Marl. Marl.

A faint prehistoric growl.
Of the woolly mammoth, say,
laying the last of its bones down
in a swamp where the micro-organisms
grind it to dust, a fine almost-white
silicated dust, that would later
grow a grass you could cut yourself on
and the stunted dwarf cypress, hard as bone.

2.

Just off the road, in shadowy sunshine,
the saw-grass springs up out of the marl.
A presbytery of approving vultures
stands off to one side while another
drives its hooked beak several times
into the base of an alligator's skull.

Inside the skull, a great delicacy,
the brain, weighing less than one tenth
of one per cent of the whole alligator.
Probably hit by a car,
it was either dragged,
or dragged itself, into the saw-grass.
There is no tune that fits this scene exactly,

though that might be a note or two
I hear inside the wind.

The vultures are taking turns.
We're taking pictures, which I suppose
is a kind of turn. Two days from now,
we'll see two or three crows
picking at the feathered bones of a vulture.
Again, it will be beside the road.
The vulture will have been hit by a car,
and we'll be in one. We won't stop.
We will wonder, though,
what eats the crow.

3.

We had come down the eastern side of the continent from Detroit,
37,000 feet over western Pennsylvania and the Great Smokey Mountains.
Atlanta off to the left, then the Gulf, Tampa-St. Pete, Bradenton, Sarasota, the sleepy keys.
We turned inland over a shelf of cloud and headed out over the Atlantic,
banked right and dropped down through it. Fort Lauderdale,
its beachside condos and sand-colored hotels thrown up in a noisy greeting,
and, skimming over the tops of palm trees, parking lots, avenues, golf courses,
warehouses,
we dropped onto the runway, safe again, in the roar of reversed rotor blades.

4.

You trudge across a saw-grass prairie,
indifferent to the muck and slime.
You are where, in some forgotten sense
of the word, it is natural to be.
Wet, wetted down, slopped.

The saw-grass tears at your clothes.
You stumble. You fall down
into a part of your nature,
the alligator part. Someone
offers you a long shoot of saw-grass.
At the base of it, a bulb
the color of peeled parsnip.
You bite into it. You've tasted
something like it before,
but can't remember what or where.
Bok choy, maybe, foxtail stem, water grass.

5.

Underneath, osceola granite,
high-feldspar volcanic rock.
Not the silted run-off of the glaciers,
not the drip-tip of the continent.
A fragment of Senegal.

Barely above the sea, slanted
imperceptibly down to its tidal flats,
briny inlets and endless dread-locked
thickets of mangrove.

Which, for 160 million years,
sedimented the bony exoskeletal
remains of so much marine life
(most of it now gone) it barely fit
in the sea.

Limestone. And, being the top layer,
called pinnacle. On which
the dead algae in the periphyton
oxidizes into calcitic mud.

Marl.

6.

A mockingbird owned the penthouse of the bush
at the back of the yard. Catbirds

skulked and mewed in the lower stories.
In the afternoon, sometimes all I heard
was a gargle or two from a red-bellied woodpecker.
One day, one of them came to the satin-leaf tree
outside the door and chopped politely at the bark.

7.

This was on an island of arrowy pines
in the midst of a sea they call a river.

The river they call a slough, and the slough
is full of a grass which is not a grass at all but a sedge.

Everything is close to everything else.
The island rises only a foot above the slough,

and the sedge is so close to being a grass
they call it a grass, and the grass so dense

you can barely see the slough through it,
even down on your hands and knees

in the midst of it. You can see it, though,
a river like a sea, less than a foot deep,

but you cannot see it move.
Over the marl, over

the eroded limestone. So slow,
Time moves swifter.

8.

From the Middle English *segge*.
From the Old English *secg*, akin to *sagu*, saw.
From the shape of the leaves.

An herb, not a grass.
Miles of it, waving under the wind,
giving the wind a watery belly.

From which a tea might be made.
Sedge tea. A thin, fine grassy extract
through which, in a lake full of it,
you could count the sand grains
on the bottom.

9.

Early morning, still dark--
the soft "hoo's" of a great horned owl,

the faint shivery scream of a barred owl.
I lie in bed trying to get back to sleep.

When that fails, I get up,
go out and stand, listening, in the dark.

They say that, without your knowing it,
a panther can be so close, you could touch it.

I do not need to see the panther
to be with the panther.

This morning the small plane had one,
I think, on its radio monitor.

It circled over the woods next door
for ten minutes. Let him see it instead, I said.

I sniffed the air, though,
hoping to catch the acidic tang of cat.

10.

Today I walked down the trail
between pine island and the saw-grass prairie.

Off to the right,
saw-grass as far as I could see.

I wanted to be out in that place somehow,
surrounded by it, disappeared into it.

I put myself there the only way I could,
walked for half a day out into it,

and when I was far enough away,
I sat down in the muck.

The saw-grass waved above my head,
its bayonets clattering in the wind.

A small cloud went by,
chased by a few birds.

I sat there a long time, trying not to think,
trying to unbe and be at the same time.

After a while, a long while,
I grabbed the marl with both hands and squeezed.

And, yes, I rubbed some of the ooze,
that pastey gray clay, on my cheeks and forehead.

I pulled up a stalk of saw-grass
and bit the one good bite there is in the saw-grass plant,

the one at the base where the leaves are all together briefly
before they shoot up, tough, toothed and separate, into the world,

and with the serrated blade of one of its leaves,
cut my thumb.

I let it bleed a little,
then washed it in the slough.