

Everglades I
(A Work in Progress)

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Orientation

If you leave
the door
 open

and a pigmy
rattler
 gets in

just get a broom
and sweep him out

gently.

I

El Laguno del Espiritu Santo

Not knowing what to do
with the map of South Florida,

impenetrable expanses of water and blades
that were not gold, not silver, not anything

valuable, those Spaniards dismissed it,
named it for the holy spirit, moved on.

I wade into high sunlit grasses. Order
stirs in the sawgrass prairie wind.

A wood stork sails its cross over me.
In the slough, the anhinga dives

over and over, then spreads its wings
to dry. Water is

the sacrament. A gator lies still,
the turtle in his teeth.

Taking in the Everglades

First, from a distance, I took in expanses
of sawgrass bending in wind. Then
I fingered the three-bladed sedge,
the sharp teeth that give it its name.

Yesterday at a shallow edge, I found tangles, strands
of small leaves, green flowerets – I pinched
and rubbed, breathed a lemony complex scent,
asked a ranger for its name: *lemon bacopa*. Edible.

Today I come to the edge, wade in, gather
a handful of scented clusters, open dark bread,
arrange a layer of leaves over ham and cheese,
make literal what I have whispered to myself –
I'm taking it into me, taking it in -- pungent kick
to the familiar, lemon bite on my tongue.

Touch Feeding

In the Everglades, what I want to touch:
soft down of the young anhinga's S-curved neck
shiny leather of the gator's black back
fleshy palm of the opossum

smooth haunch of the yellow panther
wrinkled neck of the soft-shell turtle
underwing where the ibis preens
tongue of the great blue heron

the touch-feeding wood stork's pink feet
stirring, stirring till the small fish darts
and the sensitive beak, quickest motion
in nature -- snaps shut.

Anhinga Pairing

When the male anhinga's bright blue eye ring comes,
when he displays his fine feathers, raising his tail,
waving the wings, she begins to pay attention.
Then they may swoop and glide together
near the nesting area -- preen together, lifting
and fluffing feathers, rubbing each other's bills.
But they are not a pair until he finds the perfect
twig, offers it to her and she accepts.

*Last year we saw him offer a twig, and she took it.
Even as we were all saying "Ahhh..." she lifted
that stick, hit him in the head with it and flew away.*

Acceptance means something. And when she does
accept, they become *monogamous in a bond that lasts
several years*. What I haven't been able to learn
is how they go about separation. Is it mutual, a sort of inherent
biological timing? Or does one just leave? And for the other,
is there grief?

Of Wire and Beads: At The Fruit & Spice Fair

She tells me it started with a friend's cookie tin
full of old funky beads: "I couldn't stop....
beaded jewelry, dream catchers, candleholders,
bookmarks.... mixing new & old, bought & found,
using things for what they weren't intended.
It's a metamorphosis, rotating energy, spiritual
journey. This is my butterfly."

Her loopy wild wire butterfly hangs
from my lampshade -- antennae buzzing off
asymmetrical, randomly beaded blue, each wing
turning in its own design away from that long
splendid teardrop, deep violet body, "antique glass."

I also bought these bent silver spirals
to hang from my splendid grieving body
which sometimes feels that it will break.

Holding On

I am thinking of them tonight, locked in their embrace,
waters dark and cold. Do they have any warmth
to give each other? Late yesterday, near exhaustion,
they lay in the slough overhung with reed and pond apple,
motionless – gator's jaws clamped onto the python's thick
muscle, python wrapped around the gator's rough trunk.
It started early, morning light slicing water. The python
coiled and writhed, head waving above the fight. The gator
wrestled, then backed from the slough, submerged and swam
through open water – a gator drowns its prey –
but when he surfaced, the python's head lifted, stared him in the eye.
All day it went like that, slough to slough, diving and surfacing,
python wrapped around the gator's snout, then a lurch,
python in the gator's mouth but the head
still lifting. What respect they must have for each other by now.
Neither lets go. Neither is winning. They aren't even fighting.
They lie in the dark and hold on.

Opossum Hand

—After Brian Call's Photograph

All my life I have seen them – shy, hurrying
in their slow-hurry way
shunning company and light

grey mound of fur with bare tail, leaving.
Now ... this pink tinge of tapered claw,
these silver crescents of hair,

small hand, palm open, private
fleshy paleness I want to touch,
fingerprint brushing fingerprint – intimate,

tender. Grass luminescent, a loose pattern
behind the hand. Behind the pattern, darkness.

10 Month Old Road Killed Florida Panther

--After Brian Call's photograph

Precisely at the center of the dark road
forming a cross with the white line,
the broken panther lies, its mouth
spilling blood. At first I couldn't look,
didn't want to, but I've come back to see

how gently it lies on the pavement, stretched
on its side, tail extended – how easy it would be
to stroke its shadowed tawny fur. I wonder–

Did the photographer do that?
Did he place his hand on the cat's head,
rub a little between the ears, follow
with his hand the curve of the neck,
the long back, the soft haunch before he
dragged it to the side of the road?
And did he do this before or after
the photograph -- blood still pooling, fur still warm.

Disappearance

After Brian Call's photograph *Road Killed American Bittern*

In these feathers a dry season, the colors of light
at dawn and evening, autumn and winter reeds –
whites, ambers, dark browns almost black,
textures like brushstroke, rhythms of curve,
soft light emanating from quills.
In the reeds, this is camouflage.

“You can’t see it unless it moves,” he tells me.
I cannot find it – shy bird...hiding, lifting her head,
swaying in rhythm as winds move the grasses,
this bird “just plain disappears.”

Three days now I’ve been peering into the reeds.
I see only reeds camouflaged as bittern.

Road Killed Black Racer

--After Brian Call's photograph

Something in me recoils from the very shape --
the bent stick, the curling bit of rope.

How will I learn to love this black racer
faster than a rattler, faster
than the coral snake, the rat snake, the hognose,
faster than the copperhead, the ringneck.
Not fast enough. Its skin separates
from its body; its muscle turns to dust,
shrinks to the skeletal outline.

I could learn to love it as color, yes, as pattern,
but it's the very life I must love,
the animating force, its terrifying motion.

My culture's stories of evil and betrayal
work against me. What would the Miccosukee say?
Where would they tell me this serpent's spirit is?

What might they teach me of the Snake Dance,
taking the serpent's motion into my own body,
making me the thing despised,
the thing I must learn to love.

Rangers of The Everglades

These are people who love the green,
watery, actual world teeming
with fishes and birds and furry things,

things rooted and reaching toward sky,
blossoming and seeding, needling
and coning. They love the dirt. The mud.

They walk us along sloughs, naming:
great blue heron, little blue heron, egret,
ibis, red shouldered hawk. They tell us

how alligators love and how the anhinga
feed their young. They teach us
the patience of the wood stork, stirring

ooze with a pink foot, the reticence
of the bittern hiding in sawgrass.
They teach us *river* – not *swamp*,

wide river of grass, flowing down the slow
incline of Florida – flowing, feeding, sustaining
except where humans interfere. Yes, us.

These rangers receive our questions heavy
with ignorance -- as though they were blessings.
They are glad we have come. They want *us*

to learn to name the world, too: otter,
alligator, spatterdock, gallinule,
osprey, cormorant, pond apple, gar.

That Yellow Fuzzy-Looking Stuff in the Water

Day after day I saw it, murky and unappealing,
floating and sinking everywhere, some sort of
algae I assumed. Did it belong here?
My ignorance is always blossoming.

Finally, I took some in my fingers –
soft, spongy, not the slime I expected.
...blossoming, blossoming...
I've learned its name: *periphyton*

Without this furry weave of organisms,
making oxygen, making marl,
feeding the larvae of salamanders,
feeding the apple snails that feed

the snail kites, safekeeping eggs
of a multitude of mothers
from the dry season to the wet season,
everything here risks death –

even the armor plated gator
swallowing otters, turtles, birds
that feed on fish that feed on
the invisible that depends upon

these soft ropes curling on water,
furry clumps hugging stems and blades,
this yellowy bottom fluff-- spongy stuff,
fresh smelling, alive and alive and alive.

The Drydown

In sawgrass prairies, periphyton
shrinks into mats, hordes a subtle
moisture, millions of invisible eggs.

In hardwood hammocks, liguus snails
exude a sticky ooze, glue themselves
to tamarind, estivate until the rains.

Solitary creatures congregate
in sloughs, share the critical waters
for a season (only two here, *wet* and *dry*).
Some will be food for the others –
a constant subtle dance.

For water birds it is a rich time,
fish of a thousand acres
swimming in a narrow stream.

The ibis probes, the spoonbill scythes,
the pink-footed wood stork stirs marl,
its beak a flash at any flicker of fin.

Hérons and egrets come to the edge,
extend their necks, wait (not long)
then jab. It is a time for nesting;
there will be food for the young.

And some of the young will be food.
And some of the parents will be food.
And no, the roseate spoonbill swallowed
by the gator is not a tragedy. Think of

a million egret plumes
going to church in hats,
the dusky seaside sparrow lost
for loss of habitat,
DDT (still) in eggs of anhinga,
mercury in the bass.

What Is This Frenzy of Naming?

Every day I go out with guides and charts,
checking undersides of leaves,
subtleties of feather,
splotches on bark. I want to know
the names, be able to say

good morning buttonbush,
good morning glossy ibis.
good morning gumbo limbo

as though by naming
I might claim an intimacy.

Intimacy requires more.
Intimacy is slow. It knows

not only what's here but what has been
and what is forming in the bud. For that
I must stay, know the subtle

rhythms of a year – what comes and goes
and comes again, the sound of it, color of it,
shape and smell, sting and flower, how the tangle

thickens then recedes,
where waters move,
what burns. Now the early sun

spreads over sawgrass. Dew dries.
Water brightens. A great blue heron
is in the prairie now, stalking.

Something That Lives

Somewhere deep in genetic memory
I know that this is what the world
should look like – prairie and sky.

I remember the African savannahs,
how I felt at home there, too,
not knowing why. Even this wind

of which I am so inexplicably
fond, this sun lowering toward
the horizon, hot on my cheek,

wide wingspans turning over me –
familiar in some mysterious way.

Something that lives in this body
does not live in time. (I am almost

but not quite, never quite, grasping....)
The red shouldered hawk has come.

After Brian Call's *Road Killed American Alligator*

In this photo exhibit that amazes me
(I return day after day)
I try not to look at this photograph.

I glance, walk by, but it drags itself
through the sawgrass and piney woods,
follows me home. Last night when I lay down

it was there -- the body badly torn, the eye
ripped from its socket with a nest of bloody
tissue, jaw broken completely,

the long body empty of breath, deflated.
Spilling from the torn stomach, carapaces,
claws -- whole ragged crustaceans.

Transcendent

After Brian Call's *Road Killed Purple Gallinule*

This is a bird. This garden of fine, hair-like greens
and blues, these delicate crossings and interlacings,
this jeweled seaweed swaying. This is a bird
so close I have never seen a bird so close.

This is a photograph. The photographer stood
in a dark road, bent over the dead bird, laid upon it
a soft beam of light, paid tribute with his lens, his eye,
then lifted it into its final motion, gave it
gently to the earth. This is a photograph.

I look at it and weep and soar, I am green, I am
blue, I am waving – a wing, a seaweed thing, I fly.

I Came To The Everglades with A Grief

This is what I have learned: weeping for beauty
replaces weeping for grief. Stunned at first
by the blue heron's crest, the purple gallinule's
iridescence, grief now creeps as surely forward
as this subtle river of grass flows south.

It goes about its quiet work stealthy
as the yellow panther in the understory,
necessary, as everything here is necessary
each to the other in a complex ecology.

Yesterday, only once I felt it moving. It lifted
like a bird from the expanse of sawgrass,
startled me. I had stopped looking for it.

This grief is learning to ride the anhinga, glide
and flap through forgiving air. It lands in bark-stained
water, dives beneath the surface, swims – I see it there,
indistinct shape, a quivering blur. On the bank,

the gator's black back stretched in sun
amazes me, makes me think that I can touch
a fine living leather with claws and teeth.

Leaving the Everglades

When the car was packed
and the keys surrendered,
when there was nothing left to do
but leave, I drove here.

The red shouldered hawk
is not in the cypress.
Only wind.

I get out of the car,
walk into sun and sawgrass,
feel the spongy periphyton
under my feet.

I am looking for lemon bacopa.
There I see its small flowerets
protruding from the damp mat.

I pinch off a cluster of leaves,
lift it to my face, inhale
then put it in my mouth – bitter
lemon, hold it on my tongue,
then swallow.

I drive away with it
in me.

II.

Key West After The Everglades

This morning Key West has no appeal for me – except for the chickens.
 I am in another country – awkward in simple negotiations.
 Checking in I couldn't remember my departure date. I set off the car alarm.
 I am hot. My jeans are wrong, streets full of people in shorts. I go
 through a set of motions determined long ago, not remembering
 why I signed up for this or exactly why I thought I needed it.

Chickens run loose here. I sit on the post office steps, watch three roosters
 and a pair of hens scratch in the grass under a gumbo limbo. I wonder,
 What I would be seeing if I were on the Anhinga Trail right now?
 Right now, what does light look like on sawgrass at the causeway?
 How is anhinga nest building going at the far curve of the boardwalk?
 Do the ibis and woodstorks stir for crayfish at the muddy side of the stream?
 Is the gangly pile of baby gators sunning at the right angle of the boardwalk?
 Do vultures gather at the spur, cleaning up fish dead from the cold spell?
 Is the gator with the wounded tail, pink flesh showing through his hide, sunning
 in the clearing of the willows?
 How's fishing today for the great blue heron near the water level stick?
 And that snowy egret at the bridge, what's she catching?
 How many long quiet gar hover where the stream flows under the trail?
 And is that oddly noisy green heron still over there hunting and being noisy?

Where do these chickens go at night?

South Florida Canals

Hearing about it on the news, I never really
understood this problem– people driving into canals–
the repeated instructions – stay calm,
when the car is underwater and pressure
equalizes, roll down a window or open
a door – float up. But now I see

these canals are everywhere a few feet away,
paralleling the road for miles, the hypnotic effect
of driving a line next to a line – something seeming
to draw me in. I drive saying to myself
I will not go there, I will not go over that rail...
when the pressure equalizes –float up.

Loss of Innocence, Hwy 41 & Krome Rd.

I drive through a landscape of dikes, locks, levees,
billboards -- Everglades Safari Here!

One rigid canal parallels the road, where an animal
is flattened beyond recognition.

For weeks now, I have been learning to read
the river of grass, and now this perimeter. I am losing
my innocence. A "prettiness" I once loved
of cattail and water hyacinth
now spells stagnation.

The softness of Australian pine, bright red berries
of Brazilian pepper – exotic escapees,
threats to complexity, choking out natives.

Odd this feeling of homesickness
(I don't know what else to call it),
nervous desire to get back in the park where
however altered, however threatened,
something whole teaches me how to live.

III

Taylor Slough In April

If I had not come again – in April, I would not have known
the silence of branches from which the raucous flocks have flown

or the deep green of pond apple leaves washed of their silver guano.
I am learning a new place – place with so few birds,

birds I studied hard and learned and loved. I miss them. The birds.

So I stand where I can see across the slough, three grand chicks, last
of the season. A woman passing wonders to her friend

"what those white birds are." I volunteer, "They are baby anhinga,"
fill with pleasure at the song of their name in my throat.

The Anhinga Trail in May: A Note to The Visitor

This is the subtle season. Waters have risen,
waters have spread, hundreds of long-legged birds
have flown to nesting sites. Alligators cool
in the dense grasses, underwater, in mud.
(Watch for their eyes or a rough bit of armor).

This is the season that summons your alertness,
your good keen eye. Pay attention. There are clues
in the grasses beside the trail – that patch of sandy
earth, broken eggs of the softshell turtle,
a nest robbed by raccoons or crows. In every season,
there is drama here. The strangler fig is always murdering.

You are arriving to the chants of pig frogs.
Tune your ear to those groans in deep vegetation.
Focus your eye on the expanse of sawgrass prairie,
see – a river with tree islands.
Look down at bubbles rising to the water's surface
(there's something down there). Watch for fishes,
the Florida gar, ancient fish with armor under its skin.

Look deep into the pond apple trees; let your eyes find
the nest of sticks, the furry bodies of green heron chicks
(the only heron that nests here). Soon
they will be chirping; you can follow your ear.
Near the nests, sprays of tiny orchids.

Your alertness will not fail you, and you will see
what many miss in this subtle season beyond the dry
season's obvious teeming. Later, when mosquito bites
have calmed (it is also their time), when you are home
again, check the leafy branches of your remembering.
What has nested there? What is hatching?

Alligator Mating

tender really
she initiates

a bit of stroking
a bit of caressing

their deep throated song
his water dance

if she likes him
if she allows it

they swim, his arm
on her back

if she likes this
if she allows it

they glide together
submerge together –

like something I've always wanted

Alligators in May

From the sawgrasses, the pond apples, the willow islands and buttonbushes,
from everywhere the water has risen, I hear the guttural sounds begin
and then (I've heard about this, wanted it) the gator's bellow. It repeats.
A louder bellow answers and another and... a low, choral thunder
speaks from the reeds – priests of the slough, monks growling
their prayers, their warnings, slow rhythm of the slough's breath,
throat song of these Everglades. Was it in a place like this

that ancient Tibetan monks first learned
how resonance evokes a spirit's
tender alertness? These are the gators'
mating calls. An irony? A lesson? A rebuke
for something we've forgotten –
tenderness a rumbling thunder of the body,
out of the throat, the spirit awake, trembling
in a tea colored water, wind bending the reeds.

Alone with The Alligator

I was prepared to arrive at the spur's end and for the first time find no gators there. But there was one – swimming slowly, passing through. On the narrow boardwalk, I followed that gator. As he swam steadily away, I began to sing to him – hum rather. He slowed down. A coincidence probably. I kept humming. He turned sideways, stopped. I hummed. He turned his head, looked at me, hung in the water the way they do, legs dangling. I came as close to holding my breath as one can while humming. He began to submerge (he felt safer that way, I suppose) but did not submerge completely. I hummed. Slowly, he swam toward me then, stopped directly beneath me, floated there, listening (be skeptical if you will, I know that gator was listening). We stayed that way a long time – I leaning over the rail humming, he looking up at me listening – until he tucked his legs against his body, waved that muscled tail and swam away, leaving me dizzy – alone with nameless joy.

Alligator Hand

After Brian Call's *Alligator Foot*

This is the forefoot – as easily called
an arm, a hand. I see that soft bend
at the wrist, feel my own wrist bending.

All our grasping comes to this –
the bluish wrist, the blue-black hand,
curved nails on a brown leaf.

Something from the darkness comes too fast.

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