

Everglades National Park, Florida, December 2006: An Exotic Solitude

It took me a day and a half to get from Santa Fe in northern New Mexico to the Everglades in southern Florida. I left a busy life of family and teaching for more than two weeks of almost uninterrupted solitude. As I pulled up to the Park Service offices I had a moment of terror—what if I'd made the whole thing up and the residency wasn't real? I was reassured to meet Alan Scott, the ranger in charge of the artists in residence program. He gave me a brief orientation to the park, which focused on:

The Four Poisonous Snakes Of The Park
The Two Poisonous Plants
Mosquitoes, And West Nile Virus
Why To Never Touch A Caterpillar
When To Back Away From An Alligator (if it hisses and comes toward you)

Then he took me outside to a conveniently located poison wood tree covered in poison ivy vines and had me identify each one.

"Now," said Alan "on to the dangers of man." Serial killers? Psychopaths? "People drive worse on vacation than they do at home," he said "be careful, particularly in parking lots."

The apartment I was to stay in looked simple but pleasant, despite its scuffed linoleum and obvious years of wear, and turned out to be a great place to write. The first thing I did was move my desk—card table really—to the screened porch, facing into the forest of slash pine. I decided to limit my housekeeping to boiling some mildewed sponges and arranging things in a mild way. I didn't want to replicate domestic life. I was here to write and explore. I investigated the three sections of the park, and surrounding areas. I went

in search of the rare and unusual—and was rewarded by seeing crocodiles who favor the brackish waters of the bay and a nest of a baby alligators. It turns out these toothy reptiles are devoted mothers, who tend their offspring for a full two years. I saw anhingas, turquoise-eyed cormorants, egret, ibis, cranes...a panoply of birds to observe and admire. But what I was most in search of was the rare tree snail. After several hours in a tropical hammock, a hardwood island in the usual sea of grass, I found one shining exquisitely in the gloom. Later, on a ranger's tip, I saw a cluster of multicolored shells in a slash pine forest.

One day I counted almost a hundred turkey vultures riding the thermals above my house. I was just a few minutes from the Royal Palm Visitor Center and the Anhinga Trail. A few years ago, I'd made a dash of a day trip through here and part of my motivation was to come back—and simply sit and look. I walked the boardwalk around the slough almost every day. Each time I saw something new. I saw a cormorant catch a catfish—it is the only bird that has figured out how to eat catfish—bludgeon it and break its spine and swallow it in one gulp.

I wanted to make a poetic map of the park. The poem was getting bigger and bigger, then finally settled into seven sections. Some sections required actually going somewhere—some moved in time and imagination. I went to Flamingo, and out among the mangroves, to Shark Valley and to the Gulf Coast and by boat among 10,000 Islands. And there were things I didn't see—a panther, not even a bobcat. No pythons, either, those unwelcome visitors. I also explored the border of the park, agricultural lands that interrupt the water flow, the Redland area and Krome Avenue, nurseries I would have simply thought lush and charming if I hadn't been focused on water drainage and wilderness preservation.

There was a journal that each artist had written in. Alan Scott had suggested I not read it right away, and that was a good idea—I had my own experience first. It surprised me, though, when I did read it, how similar everyone's experience was—the bliss of being in such beautiful surroundings combined with intense inspiration to create. The only conflict described, one which I shared, was whether to work or to jaunt about. One artist had drawn a detailed image of a green leaf and one of a snail.

I felt a familiar twinge of jealousy—of the ability to reproduce the world visually. Still, I found that here I was working as a poet almost the way painters must work—going out, looking at something, recording it in my notebook.

The artist who was in the apartment before me had left me a big board covered in foil. The first thing I did was put up a map of the Everglades. Then came photographs by my friend Mary Peck that had been exhibited at Miami-Dade Community College. The images of the park were in black and white, meditative long horizontals. Then I added three postcards of birds, including one ibis and one egret. I had trouble telling them apart and was plagued by not knowing which bird I'd actually seen. I kept changing them in a poem, changing the sound, trying to get it right. I hung up a pair of beautiful, long, beaded earrings and an even more lavish turquoise, white, yellow, red and black necklace. Women at the Miccosukee Indian cultural center had helped me match them. Over it all, I pinned up a painting of a model of the solar system. Why? I guess because I felt far from home but also at home in a vast space.

On the boat out of 10,000 Islands I met a family from Pasadena. The woman and I got to chatting, and at the end she exclaimed: "I've never met an author before!" I, on the other hand, had never seen white pelicans before—hundreds of them taking off from a sandbar.

Natural beauty I had expected, but I was a little nervous about solitude. My day concluded with a few errands, coming home, maybe more writing, an early idiosyncratic supper of whatever I wanted—like an avocado with seaweed salad—and early tropic sunset. There was no radio, television, or VCR in the apartment. I did have a phone, though, and intermittent access on a laptop so I could usually check my e-mail. I lay on the couch, reading a book, listening to palm fronds in the wind.

Solitude is not loneliness. Loneliness is a sense of disconnection. The reason it is easy to feel lonely in a crowd is that there is no intimacy. The same is true of loneliness within a deteriorating relationship or unhappy situation. The mere physical presence of others doesn't guard against loneliness, indeed can even exacerbate it. Solitude is the state of physical aloneness, but often coupled with a sense of greater connection—even simply to a sense of self.

My daughter Isabel, then seventeen, called me twice during that retreat—once to say her cell phone had been stolen, once to say she'd gotten into the college of her choice. Each time, her voice yanked me from the free-floating state of aloneness to the highly focused maternal state. I was looking for that self who isn't just a set of roles—mother, wife, daughter, and sister. That self can get lost in the daily shuffle. But she reemerged with time and space.

Sometimes I did get lonely, Then I might write a friend, or call home. Or I might go out and walk among palm trees and a freshwater slough teeming with birds, fish, alligators, and turtles. One afternoon, I watched a man trap a butterfly and put it in his car. Another woman, who turned out to be a European tourist, and I glared at him—his act was both illegal and unpleasant. Sensing rather than seeing us, he opened the door and let the butterfly fly free. She and I smiled, and struck up a momentary complicit acquaintance.

Snail Villanelle

On the Gumbo Limbo Trail—
Shining white luminescence—
I finally saw the tree snail.

Color of mother-of-pearl,
Rare as a Transit of Venus,
On the Gumbo Limbo Trail.

Whorled, slow-moving shell
Out of Cuba, the liguus
I finally saw the tree snail.

These patterns inspire calico shawls,
Rickrack and zig-zag and fuss,
On the Gumbo Limbo Trail.

One moon in the sky, pale spiral—
Simply its nature to please us—
I finally saw the tree snail.

Far-off, one white sail
As on the sea, the phosphorescence.
On the Gumbo Limbo trail
I finally saw the tree snail.

EVER/GLADE

1. The Photograph

edge, cloud, horizon
swoop

 of winged scavengers
buzzards over the sea of grass
far-lying hammock of trees
distant as the past
or the photograph you once took
of the tiny columned temple
classical, size of a thumbprint
in the corner

some views by nature
are panoramic
this watercourse
with Egyptian walking ibis in profile
and aningas, wings stretched,
crucified like saints,
hung out to dry

you took a photograph of me
once, as well
pregnant, in a fedora hat
clinging to my then husband...
wind, gray sky, vulture tipped wing
shapes repeat themselves
and words must also, bromeliad,
eat the air
horizon line is everything here
it is the only thing

blue hammock, mahogany hammock
an inverse island against fire,

tropics sunk in limestone:
liana, vine, the strangling fig
where poisonwood
becomes a tree
that eats itself
(avoid it in the rain)
black speckled leaves and black sap
corrode
but also have some meaning in the scheme

drop tip
of leaf shape
channels rain,
you don't want to be the same
want to cross
from one place to the next
as god must divide
water from dry land
 again and again
what did you long to see
at long last on the bay
by the marina's sway—
one more point of departure
open water
pelican sandbar
and in the magnified view—imagined Cuba or fabled
Indies...

2. Long Pine Key

I don't see it
and the panther
does not see me—
beast who steps
quieter than nightfall

gangly pines wait
for fire
to germinate—
palm fronds' noisy rattle,
I wait for the panther

orange butterfly
white star orchid-shaped
orchid
no panther
slash pines in wind

3. The Apartment

My grandmother used to say
When someone or other died
That they had "gone to Florida."
We believed her, and years later might inquire
After the So-and-sos and their bridge game
Only to discover they were long gone.

In the dark New York apartment
When I was three, my father coughed
Till he was sent to cure bronchitis
To Palm Beach, and sent me
Two postcards which in mind's eye I can see
One—pink flamingos, the other—
Characteristic clustered shape of pelicans.

Today, I try to understand the world
From this screened porch—
Landscape that lies low as my childhood,
The Cape, the Jersey Meadowlands,
And holds the same three colors:

sand
sky
scrub green

Here, clouds pass above slash pines
Ants dig pits by the front steps
And I don't dream of other places.

Whoever lived here before me
Left behind
Five I-Ching coins, silver set in gold,
But no Book of Changes.
And an indigo kimono hung on a nail

Surely by mistake
I'm tempted to try it on
But don't, a superstition
From a fairy tale as if a poisoned dress,
Invisibility cloak.

I want to stay visible to myself.
It's dangerous to sleep
Night after night
In a bed slept in by strangers.
I opened every door
Aired out the stale smell of dreams.
A button the floor,
A mop, a broom, a rancid sponge,
Pine cones dropped on the doorstep
As if by UPS, or the wind,
And a string of colored Xmas lights,
Something at dusk
To decorate
A solitude.

4. Shark Valley

I'll take no photograph
of what I can remember
low-lying sedge, bayhead island
dahoor holly
wax myrtle
coco plum
willow
and the gumbo limbo
whose name
sounds like a carousel
whose wood
was used to carve
merry-go-rounds
these trees usually found
below the Tropic of Cancer

a nest of baby
alligators
a dozen or more
surprisingly touching
not yet the toothy beasts
they'll become
but watched over for years
by their mother hidden in amphibious shadow
where water meets air

past fifty myself
I'm still trying
to perfect the mix
of getting somewhere
and being there...

5. The Folly

Bougainvillea, acres of it
Induced rainbow
In the irrigation arc
Spray of water, stink
Of nitrogen.
The land is flat, enriched, it yields
Huge alligator pears, and
Who doesn't like an orange.
The flag of Cuba waves
Over the nursery, the colors of Mexico,
Potted poinsettias.
It's paradise, the only trouble is
The flower is the serpent here,
This plowing of the soil
As old as Ur
Destroys the wild.

At the car rental
The man speaking Farsi
Checks in the woman
Who says in her accent
She has not spoken Latvian
In twenty-five years.
The turnpike rolls through tollbooths
Till it ends
At giant Walmart.
And from there
Continue on past Circle K
Past Robert's fruit stand
Where they also sell
Boxes embossed with tiny shells
And cowries carved

To each sign of the zodiac.
And then go on
Downstream by inches,
This sea of sedge
Is massive river slow,
To Flamingo Bay
Where there have never been
Flamingos.

A man builds a castle of coral
Curved and crested like topiary
An oddity, a vision, like Miami
That rises to the Atlantic side.
Globe warms,
Coral dies
And the sea
Will rise.
Meanwhile, without rest, the pickers
Squat and harvest
In the rows,
Beneath straw hats, in worn, bleached clothes
They make a sad calico
Quilted from their need and other's greed
Across the field.
Pastel, the edge of rundown town
In the rain
Buildings painted pink, lavender, pale green
By the prison's razor wire
And the truck with melons.
And along the side of the road
The poor go on walking
As they do
Everywhere.

6. Mirror

navigating by the black mirror
faint stars of the sixth magnitude
cormorant's eye turns turquoise
motel shuttered by hurricane
meridian
on the card table, *The Collected Wallace Stevens*
a nonrepresentational painter and a horizon line
fluorescent resin
the glass-bottomed boat, electric blue aquarium in the bar, the
transparent woman
 at the museum of science
homing instinct, a magnetic chip in the brain
the sea was not a mirror
emptiness...
silver palm reflected in the dark pool

7. 10,000 Islands

Mangrove roots
Coated in oyster shells—
This is a border
As surely as between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso del Norte
Between sleep and waking
Between the evening star and his wife the morning star
Between the living and the dead
This is the border
Between land and water
That first division
After darkness and light

The mind may be persistent
Even more so the mangrove roots
Red, black, white
A mangle
Where pods propagate by floating
Into the tea dark water
The anaerobic soil, the marl
Breathing tubes in the brackish bay

Shell islands
Left by those long gone—
You'll try and see the pattern,
Let the eye
Arrange a meaning
10,000 islands printed on the day
Like 10,000 cranes on kimono fabric

I longed for departure
As if it were love
As if it would take me out

Of myself, of my accustomed way—
Sandbar of white pelicans
Lifts off, wheels into the sun
Silver flash of fish before the prow
Maze of low islands, one after the other,
Gives way
To open water.

The Poinsettia

I bought a potted poinsettia—
Dark pink, pale red—
As if I were a painter

And set it on my table
To describe. It's not
What you see at first, look closely to be able

To discern green foliage called bracts
Blush carmine or flamingo beneath
Tiny yellow true flowers.

It sat there as the hours
Passed, and days, as I ate
My quiet meals

And drank my lonely sugared tea.
Beauty surrounded me like grace
And when the time came

For me to leave this place
I missed the red of Aztec flower,
Bold solitude's face.

Native

the python
does not belong
here,
not just the proverbial snake
in Eden
but invasive
liberated from a pet store
glass aquarium
to stalk the glade

tilapia, too,
eventually too big
for stork to eat
competes for nests
with the local fish

bear, turtle, panther
and humankind
molded from mud
into the Fourth World
climb from the pit into air

I also come from elsewhere

Totem

Strangler fig has a firm grasp
On the palmetto, like some
Very slow-moving python.
Outside the park ranger's house
A giant plastic inflatable snow globe
Presents Santa and Frosty beneath an endless blizzard.
"Let It Snow!" the globe proclaims
On humid mornings, rainy afternoons
In the Everglades.

Outside the Miccosukee Indian restaurant
Are two odd totem poles, black, yellow, red
Looking like Pacific Northwest thunderbirds
With a lot of teeth
Or alligators with stiff wings.
Inside, the usual, fry bread, tribal cops, unsweetened ice tea
And the lady waiting for takeout
Her t-shirt emblazoned PUBLIC ENEMY.

I also put things together
That don't belong together:
Vitamins, and the tree snail shell
From Thailand,
The doll in necklace and bead earrings
Purple rickrack on her yellow dress,
The potted poinsettia, the menorah
Of tea lights arranged on an upsidedown
Baking pan.
And the photographs
Of what is beyond my screened porch—
Tangled lianas, bay islands
All untitled, simply toned silver print
As if it were best
To simply look.

The Visitor

buzzards ride the thermals
over the slash pine forest

I don't know the neighbors
but their dreams seep through the cinder block wall

a smell comes from the sea
or of a solitary supper, cooked early

the little house with its metal awning
the neglected purple ice plants by the screen door

the day is not a mask I put on
and the bay is not a mirror

if I didn't know better
I'd say I was all alone

writing on lined paper
trying to perfect just one line

even in my sleep
the argument with the dead goes on

two saw palmettos—I think of them as mine—
rattle day and night in the wind

as noisy as the unexpected visitor
who arrives in minutes, or years

the one who keeps me waiting
the one who never appears.

Untitled #1

The yellow bench
in the sad garden
of spices

I see you pause
reading the book
marking the page with your finger

you've been dead
a long time
almost a dozen years

but here in the subtropics
you appear, as if in life
reading a book about birds

and smile the smile
that was yours alone to smile
ironic, a little wistful

as if surprised
by Fortune

yellow fruit has fallen to the ground
I was not here
to hear it make a sound of something overripe

and when I listen
for the rustle of the pages
of the turning book

you've gone away again
as I always
knew you would

Sketches in a Notebook

a lizard
living
in a rolled up shade

tree bromeliads—
two cormorants
build a nest of twigs

man with a cane
crosses paths with
a tiny turtle

child pats the palm tree
ignores
the alligator

tree canopy
butterfly, and purple glade
morning glory

rare buttonwood vine
looks like any foliage—
but rare...

a leaf drops in
the mahogany hammock—
without season

out of the palm trees
a peacock darts—escaped—
but from where?

tree snail gleams
in the leaf canopy—
stolen ghost orchid

raindrops' circles—
yellow spatterdock flowers
floating green pads...

two shy vultures
pick raindrops
off the car's roof

only the most
delicate colored pencils
draw the tree snail's shell

cypresses
drawn in an inky line,
overcast afternoon

leaf's
drop tip
implies rain

Gulf Coast Solstice

dwarf pond cypresses
standing ghostly in winter
give way

to a beach town
like any other
on the verge of rain

trying to make sense of the past
or to meditate
purely on the palm

the houses in a row
are pink, blue, green
or—pink with a green roof
aqua
lime

gray clouded sunset
2 boys + a girl
in a low quarrel by the verandah

a yellow house
with green shutters
on stilts

if this is beauty—don't
hold back
if this is suffering—the same

light leaves the town towards the bay
estuary,
the shaggy palms, no moon

The Slough

I left the slough and solitude
The moon tipped over like a cup

I left blue heron, green heron
Crane, egret, ibis

The crowd of fish in a sea of sedge
That draws alligator, wading bird

I did not take
The glass-bottomed boat to the stormy reef

What I saw
I saw also in the mind's eye

Requiring not just beauty
But belief

Tangerines piled high
In the dark glazed bowl

I went out begging
In nights saturated with dream

Between sleep and waking
Storm's whiteout

So many icicles dripping
One moon

Sagan's Seven Places is a lovely collection of verbal souvenirs, snapshots plumbing the mists, the touches, the footfalls that place. Before I started reading I knew some of these places.

Now I know them all. I can walk there.

—Lucy R. Lippard, author of *The Lure of the Local*.

...into seven unknown, vast and mysterious American places, Sagan...tude, adventure and a new freedom. Bringing us along—to the Ever...scades, Arizona, upstate New York, ancient mounds in the midwest...east, even the Santa Fe River right out her front door—each journey...fic essay and then the poems follow like tossing off crystals catching...structure of this book is inspiring, the title romantic and the actual...onderful, taking me home to my own true wandering dreams. This...made me happy.

Goldberg, author of *Old Friend From Far Away* and *Writing Down the Bones*.

...w/I saw also in the mind's eye," Miriam Sagan writes in this exquisite...ems, *Seven Places in America*, that ranges across National Parks and...ificant geological and historical sites. With an Impressionist's feel...phere and color, a (poetic) geologist's vocabulary and long view,...earths that "inbetween place"—the permeable intersection of self...scape, the wild and the suburban, solitude and mere aloneness, ...d beauty's decay—which is the "terrain of the poem." Her ability to...ne moment, to float on "coracles of dream" and bring us back these...oems as if they were "photographs or wildflowers," is unsurpassed. ...ldaw, author of *So Late, So Soon: New and Selected Poems*, *The Lightning Field*

Sagan has published twenty-five books, including the poetry collection *Lost*. She founded and directs the creative writing program at Santa Fe Community College. Her work has won a Border Library Association Award, a Eco Book Award, and best memoir of the year from Independent Publisher. In 2011 she received the Santa Fe Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts.

ISBN: 978-1-890932-42-8 \$15.95

Sherman Asher Publishing
www.shermanasher.com



by J. Gail Reike. Cover design by Jim Mafchir

Seven Places in America

A Poetic Sojourn

SAGAN

SAP

Seven Places in America

A Poetic Sojourn

by Miriam Sagan