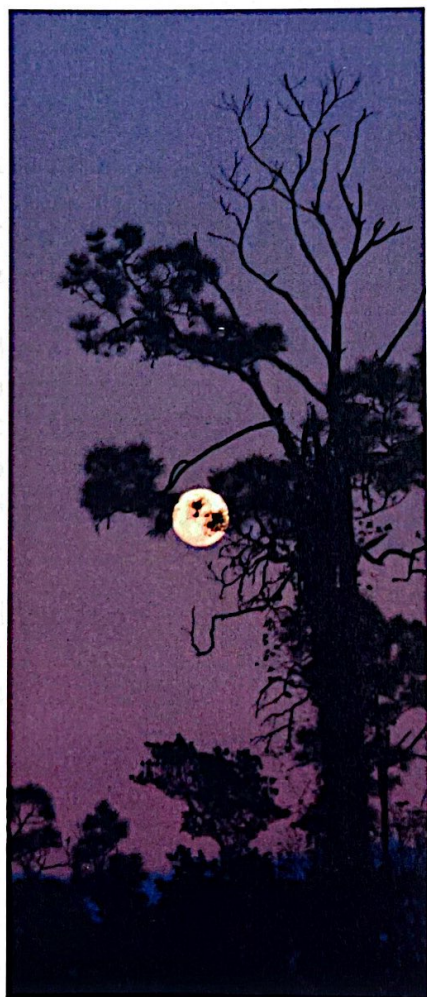


# Chasing Moons in the Everglades

Poems

by Karla Linn Merrifield



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- 1832: Birdman of the Everglades  
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       <[hbstowe@gmail.net](mailto:hbstowe@gmail.net)>  
       From: Karla Linn Merrifield  
       <[vagabondpoet@yahoo.net](mailto:vagabondpoet@yahoo.net)>  
       Subject: Putting Heads Together  
 1896: *Willie Bee* Came to Dinner  
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 1913: All Aboard for Eternity  
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 1917: To: Harriet M. Bedell, Stevens Village, Alaska  
       From: Dora Jane Roberts, Flamingo, Florida  
 1954: Elegy for William Curtis Sturdevant  
 1996: In Tom's Honor  
 2009: Bouquet for Kathleen

Notes

Acknowledgments

About the Author

*for Roger,  
ever my husband  
and explorer with me in the Everglades*

*and for  
the staff and volunteers  
of Everglades National Park  
to whom I am indebted  
for their knowledge and generosity of spirit  
provided through the Artist-in-Residence Program*



***"We dwell on a largely unexplored planet."***  
—E.O. Wilson

***"There are no other Everglades in the world."***  
—Marjory Stoneman Douglas

## Threshold

Going into an alien land  
on a willful journey  
into Earth's rarest corner,

a shallow pocketful  
of remaining wonder,  
I pause

at the threshold to evoke  
the mangrove woman  
in me. Will I be

among the red ones  
with prop roots flexed  
stretching at the edge

in mingling sweet water  
and water of the sea?  
Or a black mangrove

standing the middle ground  
with more soil beneath me,  
less salt in my limbs?

Or from the top of lowland forest,  
a white one reaching highest  
toward a hardwood hammock?

Am I ready to become  
intimate with garfish and grouper,  
alligator and cottonmouth and mosquito,

and ibis, egret, spoonbill and heron?  
Will I listen when elusive panthers whisper  
of how I will be deeply changed?

I answer the Everglades: I say yes.



## **Everglades Horizons Mosaic**

### **I. River of Grass**

**Limestone**

**sawgrass**

**egret**

**dew**

**If I do not evaporate  
in winter's drought  
I will become  
the summer slough**

## II. Ten Thousand Islands

Mangrove

osprey

hurricane

mosquito

If I am not lost  
in the watery labyrinths  
I will become an island



### III. Atlantic Coastal Ridge

Starlight

panther

slash pine

owl

If I do not suffocate  
in the upland fire  
I will become the refuge

#### IV. Taylor Slough

Strangler fig

snail eggs

anhinga

gar

If I do not succumb  
to the sucking muck  
I will become the oasis



## **V. Big Cypress Hammock**

**Thunder**

**tigerwing**

**wild tamarind**

**snail**

**If I do not freeze  
in unseasonable cold  
I will become the marsh**

**VI. Eco-Pond**

Sweetwater

dragonfly

moonflower

grebe

If I do not turn  
to salt  
I will become the clouds



## VII. Double Dome

Cypress

orchid

sapsucker

peat

If I do not submit  
to the storms' horizontal force  
I will become the forest

# **VIII. Rock Reef Pass**

Lichen

spider

warbler

sand

If I do not wash away  
like grains on the tides  
I will become the fossil dune



**IX. Borrow Pond**

**Cooter**

**dragonfly**

**cattail**

**gale**

**If I do not dissolve  
in acid rain**

**I will become the mirrored sky**

## X. Royal Palm *An Erythrina Prayal*

Gumbolimbotree

marlberryvine

catbriarvine

ballmossepiphyte

If I dissolve  
into the hardwoods' soft floor  
I will become the hammock

*Styphelia holii* *Styphelia*

*Styphelia holii* *Styphelia*

*Styphelia holii* *Styphelia*

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*Styphelia holii* *Styphelia*



## Everglades Haiku Suite

Thick the limestone base  
but porous—ancient raindrops garnered  
quench all thirst.

This river of grass harbors  
pineland keys—soughing  
their ocean of wind.

Mangroves grip land's end,  
marching imperceptibly  
to embrace the sea.

Periphyton thrives  
in clear freshwater shallows,  
most-humble manna.

Millions of spiders  
drape webs across the sawgrass,  
gem-bright at first light.

Tree snails stud the limbs  
of wild tamarinds, sleeping  
through the dry season.

White pelicans, pink flamingos,  
green herons float—  
bright feathers, strong wings.

Three anhinga chicks  
crowd the nest, plumes darkening;  
today one will fly.

On hot afternoon breezes;  
turkey vultures stalk  
more cars, more road kill.

On the banks of lazy streams,  
alligators doze,  
inscrutably mute.

Eighty panthers,  
others say one hundred, remain.  
Their scream dies with them.

## Geologic Time: An Everglades Fractal

Rain fell

300 million years ago

during the great collision.

Gondwana marched up the aisle

across the Iapetus Ocean to meet

her bridegroom North America

and rain fell on the New Appalachians,

but not on Florida's terrain

locked deep in Earth's womb.

Rain fell

180 million years later

during the great subterranean rift

when Triassic hot spots,

their volcanic activity, became Jurassic

and the drift apart began.

The rain fell in the house of turtles

and lizards and seeped into

exposed sedimentation, reaching

Florida's ancient igneous basement.

Rain fell

135 million years ago

on the porous fossilized beds

of rudimentary oyster-like mollusks.

Rain fell and soaked through 11,000 feet

to the oil-bearing mattress,

and the spongy earth that housed

Florida's embryonic aquifer

mopped it all up.

Rain fell

2.5 million years ago

and the Cretaceous crust cooled.

The era's high ground subsided and

what geologists call Sunniland submerged

into the bathtub of a shallow, tropical sea.

Rain fell on limestone to the platform floor,

accreting Florida.

Rain fell

2 million to 12,000 years ago

through four Pleistocene glaciations and



low ocean levels,  
filling the cavernous crockery bowls  
in accessible cupboards  
with potable water.  
Rain fell and fell and fell  
as the humid climate warmed  
and Florida prepared for  
the arrival of domesticating man.

Rain fell  
6,000 to 5,000 years ago  
as artisan slaves worlds away constructed  
Cheop's Great Pyramid in Egypt  
and shamanic proto-Indians polished  
bone ornaments wet in their sweaty grasp.  
Prodigious, pristine rain fell  
for the first time  
in the Everglades of Florida,  
conceived so long ago in Africa.



## The ABCs of Everglades Hurricanes

The alphabet of natural disaster opens again  
each June at the beginning: A as in Andrew.

Since the '50s, we name all hurricanes  
that rage across this liquid land  
that is southern Florida.

We remember the most destructive hurricanes,  
hurricanes for the history books,  
hurricanes for the records of man.

We recall that Isbell rearranged the 10,000 Islands  
on her whirlwind trip in 1964.

Inez, '66, the crazy one, zigzagged  
her path of slaughter through the Keys.  
And then ensued Alma, Gladys, Abby.  
The '60 rocked on—and along came Donna.  
Goodbye mangroves, goodbye white herons.  
She's the hurricane who stole the deadly show.

Down at Flamingo, it was only a matter of time,  
thirty-some years of calm before another murderous blow.

What Donna didn't finish  
in the black forest of the coast in '68,  
Wilma did in two-o-o-five.

In her deadly wake of storm surge and salt intrusion,  
the Eco-Pond is going, going, almost gone.

The lodge: blown out, washed out,  
doorless, windowless concrete hulks.

The maniac had done her ghost-town work.

We recite a litany of ravishment  
from Madeira Bay, to Cape Sable, up to Chokoloskee,  
where Lostman's River keeps getting lost.

We track, we monitor, we enter data.

We author articles and books.

We issue treatises and master plans.

We write poems.

And we wonder why the hurricanes are getting worse.

Will a year come soon when we run through our ABCs  
to call the last and worst one Zora?



## Learning the Tide Tables of Grief

Where the Southern Everglades meets the sea,  
tide is the medium; all our comings  
and goings out into the Gulf, downstream  
to estuaries, into bays, wherever the eye goes and  
spilled ashes seeks their course, we are ruled  
by the spring and neap, by moon phases.  
And it is low water now, friend, low water  
in this tropical place and in your heart.

A few days from now, a few weeks—soon—  
your father will die, you will be orphan.  
But you will be wise enough a child  
to listen with me to waves lapping,  
clasping at countless roots, then letting go,  
retreating, but returning and returning.  
You will hear it said by the turning tide:  
Life goes on after death.

As in Paradise, distances are immeasurable  
in the Southern Everglades. Are there 10,000 islands?  
How could anyone tell? Shark Point, Panther Key,  
Cormorant Pass deal in earthly eternities;  
the dead lie in the open.  
This is vulture country, but living goes on  
in this tropical land and in your heart.

Because it is low water now, friend, low-water's  
slack tide of exposed oyster beds and sand banks;  
the channel is difficult, treacherous.  
Wait with me; be still for this instant in your heart.  
Time will come soon enough for tears, and  
to take up the current and follow its flow.

*for Katie McDonald*



## Shift of Shape in the Real Magic Kingdom

to go once again  
in dignity  
you cannot assume  
the mantle of a she-panther  
dozing and sated in savannah  
sun-dappled sabal shade  
it will be some time  
before you will be able  
to growl in the night

nor can you begin  
by donning the feral boar's  
bristling nape  
as he scrounges for corms  
in sandy thickets  
rooting in the sodden earth  
in August

the wing muscles  
of a red-shouldered hawk  
would press your endurance  
even though he calls to you  
full of pride  
in a familiar voice  
as he scans  
the salt marsh

you are not ready—  
it would be too demanding—  
to fly in full swells  
above the curve of tides  
as a diminutive palm sparrow  
flitting amidst palmettos  
or as a green heron crouching  
hidden in a pond apple tree  
or a velvet-brown bat moth  
clinging to a cardinal tree

not yet—but one day—  
it will be otherwise  
one day you will become  
as the periphyton



an algal form  
 on the River of Grass  
 the very foundation of life  
 in the Everglades

one day you will come to notice  
 the smallest things  
 millions of microorganisms then  
 mosquito fish roe      mosquito larvae  
 the young of both  
 you will witness the emergence  
 of dragonflies  
 that will lead you further afield  
 as you learn once again  
 to go with dignity

*for Mark Block*

## Step Right Up

Laaa-dieeeee and gentlemen—  
Welcome to Everglades World  
for your Hell-on-Earth  
experience of a lifetime!

My good people,  
I guarantee you monster weather events,  
gargantuan winds of epic proportions,  
more authentic than anything  
you'll ever see at Epcot Center.  
Come aboard the Wilma Tram  
at Flamingo: You'll *live* the hurricane!

Don't miss our Snakes and Spider Ride—  
serpents bigger than fire hoses,  
bugs the size of your fist!  
We've got the venomous;  
we've got **KILLERS!**  
Alligators galore  
and crocodiles, too!

Don't worry, folks,  
about long lines at Vulturama.  
There's more carrion  
than you can count.  
We'll get you into the show on time.

And just for the kiddies,  
the spine-chilling chance  
to be panther meat!  
To be prey of hawk, prey of owl,  
prey of the fearsome Kite Bird!

In the magic kingdom known as  
Everglades World, we have  
fun, fun, fun for the en-tire family.  
This ain't no techno-simulated  
safari into Nature,  
red in tooth and claw.  
This ain't no Wii video game.  
Leave your gizmos at the door;  
this here show's the real thing.



### Everglades Botanical Villanelle

Green inspirits the Everglades' deep night,  
teaching how to bow to the wind by day.  
Breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

Slash pine, mangrove, cypress, bay know the right  
path—such needled saints, leaved martyrs are they.  
Trees inspirit the Everglades' deep night.

Bladderwort, floating heart, spatterdock bright,  
and mild turtle grass of Florida Bay,  
breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

By sun, by moon, pith to peat in life's flight,  
algae and palm alike point the good way;  
ferns inspirit the Everglades' deep night.

Epiphyte, orchid, sedge, and reed give sight  
to the blindest, color Earth again gay;  
breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

May gumbo-limbos grow full height,  
and lichen on nurse logs prosper, I pray.  
Green inspirits the Everglades' deep night.  
Breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

## "Groping for the Spirit" in Spanish Moss

### I.

Welcome to the vaulted rooms  
of southern woods,  
of primordial gloom,  
illuminated glory.

Oh, most influential flora  
in the southeastern landscape,  
most widespread,  
most distinctive!

Yes, *Tillandsia usneoides*—  
no moss at all—but finest drapery  
of epiphyte enchantment.

No, not a parasite  
despite its gothic demeanor, but  
a most abundant bromeliad.

Pineapple cousin, orchid sister,  
of tiniest greenish-yellow blooms,  
faintly sweetens quiet nights.

Note frosting of minute pointy scales  
—nutrient-snatching dust catchers—  
effective chlorophyll mask.

Observe if you can  
feathery floating seeds  
windblown far and wide across  
Dixieland.

Not a plant apart  
but live oak's boon companion,  
festooning those bishop trees.

None too picky, either:  
partial to cypress too—  
silver gowns for swamp owls.



Forest's *bella senorita*  
like a mermaid coifed in seaweed  
tosses wind-combed tresses.

## II.

Shimmying to languorous drums,  
paleo-Indian girl  
swivels her hips  
in mossy skirts.

Did Timucuan mothers  
once cushion their cradles  
—and babies' graves—  
with "Spanish moss?"

Never a simple species  
to name: *barbe en Français*,  
beard of the enemy.

Not inappropriately as well  
called by conquistadors *peluca francesca*,  
enemy's wig, *por favor*.

No longer upholstery  
and horse collar stuffing,  
stuff for cordage—  
frizzly, black, stringy.

Nor by any means  
forlorn gray curtains  
once worth six cents a pound.

Take mud, mix in dat moss,  
git good walls for dem slave shanties.

Wise women, shamans found  
it useful for edema, hemorrhoids,  
the weak of heart.

## III.

She remembers the last voices of  
ivory-billed woodpecker,  
Carolina parakeet,  
passenger pigeon.

She recalls dire wolves  
gone like ancient aborigines  
to the Great Hunting Ground.

Above, she spies  
introspective spadefoot frogs'  
spare nocturnal activity:  
one hop, maybe two.

A few braids  
as finishing touches  
—shag carpeting—  
for cozy swallowtail kite nests.

Three bat species  
soften their sleeping crannies  
with it in caves, on limbs.

She studies rat snakes,  
coral snakes scaling branches  
for flightless newborn flying squirrels.

But look all you might;  
you won't find any  
biting chiggers, ticks, mites.

## IV.

Untangle now  
these filigreed strands;  
find within this ubiquitous botanical  
poetry's *rara flora*.



## Visit to the Magic Kingdom of Everglades Trees

Wouldn't you like to grow up to be  
*Rhizophora mangle* in Florida Bay?  
A red mangrove exuberant about living  
on sea's edge, reaching down with tangles  
of aerial roots to allow day's tides  
to tickle your fancy knees?

How about living the lush life of  
a bald cypress, *Taxodium distichum*?  
Envision yourself reaching up toward  
the ephemerality of flat-bottomed clouds  
as they wallow by your dome in mid-winter.

Can you see yourself fashionably attired  
in the smooth, silky bark of wild tamarinds,  
so generous are the *Lysiloma latisiliqua*,  
hosting a soirée for tree snails?  
*Liguus fasciatus*? Let them eat lichen!

Could mahogany be what you have in mind?  
Is there a future for you withstanding  
hurricanes in a hardwood hammock,  
intrepid as you are stately, Mr. *Swietenia*,  
rising far above the grassy water?

Or is the gumbo-limbo your thing?  
Why not laugh out loud and long  
on the trail at Royal Palm because visitors  
call you *tourist tree* instead of *Bursera simaruba*?  
So what if you like to shed some skin  
on your thick, mighty limbs!

Are you ready to grow in shrubby places  
in the company of epiphytes?  
Want to play *Annona glabra*, pond apple,  
zoning out the live-long day in the ecotone  
with snail kites, *rara avis* in your branches,  
who shriek clear calls about the essentialities  
of mutual survival?

Come with me knocking on green doors.  
Come bend as the wind bids its trees do.

## What the Boatman Didn't Say

An Everglades boatman pointed out  
the mottle of yellows in the nearby trees,  
declared them the sacrificial leaves  
of red mangroves.

I take and eat the salt  
of these channel waters;  
I am born to die  
so that the limbs, bole, prop and aerial roots  
of the others of my waxy green kind  
may clutch a scrap of earth  
at the edge of the sea  
and breathe, awaiting each evening's  
wading birds to provide a roost,  
and breathe again, taking in the nights,  
the shifts in tides, chasing moons and stars.



## Out on Some Limbs and Back

Long, long ago in a place far, far away—  
it feels like that now, tonight—  
I was a woman of a certain age  
who threw herself brazenly under the spell  
of Everglades red mangrove trees.

Because I am a human being  
and not a mythical creature  
who can turn into an osprey  
and fly through a pellucid sky,  
I am a body that is two-thirds water.  
The Everglades red mangrove trees know that;  
theirs is a world that is two-thirds water.  
By inviting me to trace their roots,  
they recognized our kinship  
and made me see all our similarities.  
So I followed my glance into the mazes  
and crossed the threshold between land and sea.

In this peculiar tale,  
in the heart of the 10,000 Islands,  
not a make-believe realm,  
but a locus of true wildness,  
the Everglades *Rhizophora mangle*,  
bewitched me and then demanded  
that I penetrate their mystery,  
learn a vital lesson,  
stumble over a moral—  
pursue a daunting quest.  
They left it up to me to choose.

So when the currents stirred them.  
they said in unison,  
*We are the perfect metaphor  
for interconnectedness.*

When egrets and mosquitoes  
settled in for the day,  
they said in unison,  
*We are your children.*

When first the light of Venus  
and then a waning moon shone,

they said in unison,  
*And we are the sacrificial yellow leaves;*  
*we are like a tribe lost,*  
*a people forgotten;*  
*we may not survive the new millennium;*  
*we fear we are not immortal.*

From so long ago, from so far away,  
 I find myself now.

Although I can hear the Gulf surf,  
 I know it is not *their* Gulf,  
 nor is this place I've landed theirs.  
 This is not their habitat;  
 this is not their ecosystem.  
 But they're here, aren't they?  
 The Everglades red mangrove trees  
 beseech me yet.



## Shul

Morning's lowest tide on Chokoloskee,  
the island named for "old house" in Seminole.  
The sharp-edged half-shells of oysters,  
now visible, remind us of unguarded leagues ahead  
where time is fluid and the past rides the current  
into the present on the shuttling tiptoes of crabs.  
Their pale stumpy claws grab us, transport us  
into the open with our memories exposed.

We remember how this bay has always risen  
toward high tide in full silver star light.  
Darkness once grew bright on the chickees  
of ancient Calusas who slowly built a midden,  
accreting this island mound called Chokoloskee  
on the western edge of the Everglades.

As modern-day denizens, we now know  
intimately this one of Ten Thousand Islands,  
this singular place renowned for the full-bodied  
succulence of fully armored bivalves,  
for its mullet, grouper, and snook fish,  
for its abundance of mosquitoes,  
for its shifting channels, its ambiguity.

On the western edge of the Everglades  
we return to instinct, allow our limbic brain  
to guide us through mythic threads to  
the historic particularities of Chokoloskee.  
Amid the tangle of tree roots, we are mortals  
invited to get lost in what we thought  
we had forgotten.



## The Bearable Edge of Being

Always a red mangrove  
 is preoccupied  
 with the perpetual ritual  
 of the tides  
 in its thicket of watered  
 prop roots and absorbed  
 by white ibis  
     probing into  
     their perches amidst  
 its knitted limbs  
     repeating their busy vespers  
     evening upon evening  
 tropical sunsettings monsoons  
 winter's dry weeks on end aside  
 they are for years upon years  
 at the ceremony  
 of the seasons

So who is she to disavow  
 their tenacious primordial  
 devotions on the verge  
 being as she is also adapted  
 to the quotidian regime of  
 an edge species priestess  
 of the margins speaking  
 in tongues of owls  
 at twilight the time between  
 dwelling in the tangled realm  
 at the seam between land and sea  
 where woman becomes tree  
 tree becomes woman  
 and both walk forth  
 knowing *who who who looks for you*  
 ever at the turning point  
 crossing the cusp of the full moon?



## Love in the Place of the "Walking Trees"

In a fragile kingdom of patient desire,  
*Rhizophora mangle* shoots down  
 from its tangled boughs her aerial roots.  
 When I return several years later,  
 they have grown much longer.  
 She has at last reached water.  
 Such is the thirst of a red mangrove  
 to set out her slim-legged props  
 as if on bended knees so she may  
 one day crawl into Florida Bay.  
 So slowly does she proceed  
 that it may take a century  
 for Land to marry Sea at her feet.  
 But this patient union was destined  
 according to sensible heredity:  
 Her species shall always shed  
 salt-laden, sacrificial yellow leaves;  
 one by one—her tears, her kisses—will drop.  
 I've studied this creature of the ecotone,  
 miraculously evergreen; I've witnessed  
 her at the shifting edges of tides.  
 She walks toward invisible boundaries,  
 crossing borders; earth inevitably weds water.  
 I've seen a new kingdom come,  
 red-named, yellow-leaved, green-hearted.

for Wanda Schubmehl  
 with a line from Thomas Merton

## A Lesson in the New Biology

To understand the silence of the universe,  
 I listened to an immature dwarf mangrove crab,  
*Aratus pisonii*, one small enough  
 to crawl inside the narrow neck  
 of a clear bottle I found washed up  
 on a crescent of gray island beach  
 in the protected Florida waters  
 of Rookery Bay.

To hear the silence of the universe,  
 I went alone and quietly,  
 the better to detect  
 that diminutive creature's scrawny scratchings  
 on the glass.  
 I crouched closer to listen.  
 At the instant of high tide,  
 he lightly scraped the wall.  
 He paused, then brushed softly  
 at the moment of ebb.  
 He stopped, then made another stroke at the next high.  
 He hesitated, then stabbed as neap tide passed.  
 He breathed in, breathed out;  
 he wrote his message like a young genie  
 prepared to grant wishes.

I arrived as if on cue  
 to learn my lesson.  
 A month ago he was a lowly zoea,  
 a transparent ort of plankton floating  
 in the briny broth of the bay,  
 as nearly invisible  
 as he was then inaudible.  
 But he grew claws and a carapace.  
 He practiced diligently the code  
 of all crustaceans of his ilk,  
 in light, in dark, as dictated  
 by the gyring ocean, the metamorphic moon,  
 and the Earth relentlessly twirling  
 around the sun.  
 His youth passed as has mine,  
 and he became the one to teach me  
 the silence of the universe.



From his wave-worn shelter,  
 he heard me coming;  
 he knew I would tune my ears  
 to the world around us.  
 All he says comes true.



# **Sessile *B. improvisus* Does Cecil B. DeMille**

A barnacle thinks in motion pictures  
like a hermaphroditic cinematographer;  
he/she is one unified glossy gray eye

focused on the murky lens  
of vivid sub tropical waters with  
a cast of trillions in his/her sweeping view.

From an armored turret  
this crafty marine animule pans  
the green horizon

dense with zoo- and phytoplankton,  
stars in this spectacle of the ocean.  
With frenzied waves of feather-fan cirri,

our gifted barnacle  
captures a distant perspective:  
rising tide, rising pulse of current

through the channel where  
it narrows. Shooting on location  
at the north rim of Johnson Bay,

the queer he/she creature reaches up,  
closes in on copepods.  
He/she sticks to his/her root

and sees things from two points of view:  
One moment she is like a woman  
in a nursery with her babies—

all her nauplia—  
that go floating off camera.  
Another moment, he sees the universe

like a man, well-hung, fucking nonstop.  
They have the big picture with  
an adamant grip on their briny situation.

She? He?  
Either way it works,  
an epic in the making.

*for Geoff Trager*



## Reeling in the Truth

In the impenetrable maze  
of the western Everglades,  
the common snook rises  
out of Lostman's River  
at the end of my fishing line.

His silver torpedo body flashes,  
its black stripe along the flank  
from gill to tail traces  
a thin line about the line  
between land and sea,  
between above and below surface,  
between the known and not-known.

I kiss my sixteen-inch sliver  
of mystery and return him  
into the brackish slack tide  
in this wild labyrinth of  
the Ten Thousand Islands,  
home and harbor to my snook,  
a fish back in water who has  
made it in the shade  
in a way I can only glimpse.

## Stalking Revenge on the Tamiami Trail

This poem stands on the caution-yellow feet  
of a snowy egret with all six toes  
submerged and distorted by refraction  
through an inch of clear, if toxic, water.  
This poem balances on its edge of Earth  
with the black-lacquered stilts  
of a dedicated wader; it crooks its neck  
low to wield a sharp black sword of a bill.  
How quick the thrust and strike to angle prey.

While this poem could loft on  
weightless white wings, could be a seraph  
of the early dew, and fly into a remnant  
pond apple tree, instead it waits, still, stiller,  
to feed. On mosquito fish? Young Florida gar?  
An exotic, invasive tilapia? No. This poem  
claims a more voracious, eclectic appetite.  
Up to its ankles in shallow Everglades waters,  
it takes a studied stand on one foot,  
poised, focused, watching for you to swim by.



## At the Feet of Birds

I envy webbed feet of pelican,  
anhinga, double-crested cormorant  
one on the cedar pylon  
of a derelict wharf,  
two on low telephone wires.  
They grasp the hurricane's  
sweeping truth  
and let go when it's time.

I envy the long-toed feet  
of all egrets and herons and ibis  
to walk on water lilies,  
to curl nimble digits over  
an edge of limestone,  
sink ankle deep in mudflat muck.  
They grasp the tidal mandate to  
obey life's ebb and flow  
and let go when it's time.

I envy the taloned among them:  
red-shouldered hawk, bald eagle,  
osprey and swallow-tail kite,  
lording over the Earth from above  
mangrove islands, sloughs of  
pond apples, the River of Grass.  
Well-clawed, they grasp  
with a parliament of owls the eternal law  
and let go when it's time.

In my envy, I wish to possess  
the power of Everglades birds  
to hold on. I wish to become  
a roseate spoonbill and learn  
how to grasp the tides firmly,  
then let go when it's time.

*for Roger Weir*

## Pine Island Reveille

At first light of day, first bird call is a cardinal's as he arrives from among slender slash pines. First silhouettes of day emerge—the trees' high black crowns against dawn's cerulean, their roots swathed with ruby: first colors of day.

Across the lane, a dog barks, heralding first business to be done. Park ranger at the other end of the leash scratches first of many duties off his mental to-do list.

Above a clatter of crockery within the nearest bungalow, first work gets under way. A wife announces the hour to her husband; first human voice intrudes.

Rose pales to pearl along the upland horizon to the east; first white of day rises on bird wings into thinning blue. After a cold night, first details of day emerge: With red-headed urgency, woodpeckers hammer first blows.

The first sun of day appears. Its heat stirs no wind, no clouds mask its face. Starlings begin to bustle and red-shouldered hawks are first in the forest to fly beyond the horizon. It will be mid-morning before the chill lifts. So black vultures, last to commence their rounds this day of firsts, sleep late.

Everglades light has come. I snuff the candle. Behind my back, a crow caws.



## Fibonacci Aviary of the Everglades

Kite  
 hawk  
 spoonbill  
 anhinga  
 crested cormorant  
 with the turquoise eyes of desire  
 woodpeckers of the pines and  
     ospreys of the mangroves  
 herons great; reddish; little blue;  
     green-backed; yellow-crested,  
     black-crested twins of the night—  
 Will they go the sad way  
     of the fabled  
     Cape Sable seaside sparrow?  
 Only the ubiquitous vultures  
 I believe fly  
     to infinity.

## Refuge of History

On the day of the thirty-three  
dabbling roseate spoonbills

one white ibis and I  
shouldered in the lower limbs

of the red mangroves  
to await the rising brown

tide bringing the water-borne  
swirl and eddy of noonlight

and sustenance of time  
to place the heart upon.



## Not a Pretty Picture

Call them the purloiners of good rain,  
the ushers of ulcerous sprawl;  
call them the Torquemadas  
of the Everglades;  
call them the South Florida Water  
Management District because  
the Devil has to have a name.

With Him, we have made a Hades  
of this young 15,000-year-old place,  
a place spanning a scant 9-million-square acres  
that ladles its 40-mile-wide River of Grass  
slowly into the cradle of the sea.  
Florida Bay now receives  
but 1/10<sup>th</sup> of its historic flow.

Paddle into Satan's Dead Zone  
in the bay through 100 square miles  
of moribund sea sponges.  
Motor over 100 thousand acres  
of dying sea grass, manna of sea turtles.  
Smell the reek of the dead.

Every accursèd day 600 people  
adopt Florida as their home.  
In the last 60 years, we've lost  
¼ of our forests, 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s of our wetlands;  
and, at the end of the peninsula,  
117 species risk extinction.

We count the iniquities:  
1,074 miles of canals  
720 miles of levees  
250 primary control devices  
25 locks  
18 major pumping stations  
and the wanton creation  
of pathogenic levels  
of mercury, nitrogen,  
phosphorous and pesticides.

The landscape hungers and thirsts.

*A rant for Campbell McGrath*

## Cameos of History

### 1513: Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Death

All flora and fauna,  
panther among them, knew.  
On a hawk's cry  
from mangrove to mahogany  
they received word.  
He would come  
for slaves and gold  
on the first white sail.  
He would arrive  
in courtly velvet shoes  
and glinting armor.  
He would come  
with crossbow, sword, cross, the pox,  
and greed and glory and God.  
Even the periphyton understood  
he would come  
to conquer *La Florida*.  
The Everglades' requiem  
thus commenced.



### 1564: The Virgin One

If an Everglades goddess reigns,  
she is a Calusa spirit,  
a woman of oyster mounds—  
the pearl who never saw  
the glinting Spanish  
axe a kingdom out of bones.

And she is the limestone full moon,  
clasped by slash pines;  
she is the purple gallinule,  
a rainbow of gems in the marsh.  
She is the prairie's opalescent periphyton,  
mother of all.

She is the gold river of grass;  
she is the silver, liquid light.

## 1832: Birdman of the Everglades

Shame on you, James J.,  
my hero fallen from grace.  
I have found you out,  
have sifted your lust  
in Everglades rookeries.

Remember Sandy Key, 1832,  
rapturous roseate spoonbills,  
herons thrusting rapier bills,  
ludicrous pelicans yawning lazily,  
and hot-pink flamingoes  
that agitated your breast?

When you wrote to your readers,  
"I thought I had reached  
the height of my experience,"  
didn't you really mean feeling  
the rifle jolt, spray of shotgun pellets,  
the sporting thrill?

What possessed you, Mr. Audubon,  
to plunder your feathered beauties,  
more than you could paint  
in a lifetime, far more  
than you could eat—  
65 fresh marbled godwits on  
a long wooden platter?

Some first naturalist,  
some ornithological icon  
you turned out to be.  
First to teach man  
to love South Florida's birds  
to death.

*with lines from Ornithological Biography, Vol. 5*



## 1840: The Ebony Savior

Our darkie was John,  
"Jungle Hog" behind his back.  
Navy paid him a slave's nothin'  
to guide us through that misery.  
Aye, us ninety sailors slogged  
after the black brute  
on orders to scalp  
some slippery Seminoles,  
bag the bastards, reap  
five hundred bucks a buck.  
Ain't seen one damned Indian.  
Reckon John was in cahoots.  
Christ! Skeeters, snakes,  
gators, that devil grass.  
Worse? We gotta' live  
knowin' a nigger boy  
saved our sorry ass.

**1842: US Army Expedition,  
58 Days, 85 Soldiers,  
One Native Guide, One Woman**

My Seminole husband,  
your guide, earned a pittance  
and I earned

no thanks  
for my crane liver stew,

no thanks  
for mending mosquito netting,

no thanks  
for salves to sooth  
sunburn, sawgrass gashes  
and poisonwood rashes,

no thanks  
for sucking cottonmouth venom  
from puncture wounds,

no thanks  
when you took my brown womanhood  
by force.

I, *Aw-won-aw Hoke-tee*,  
willow-tree woman,  
who once bent to white men, I say:  
No thank you.



**1881: Hiss, Hiss for Disston**

*Reclamation!*  
*Hal-le-lu-jah!*  
*Hal-le-lu-jah!*  
*Reclamation!*

Hammy Disston, he de Man—  
he be Dark Angel  
of dragons breathing fire;  
he be Devil of Machinery.  
He be de Future King.

Grant us, Industrialist Master of Earth,  
the raw instinct to exploit;  
give us the vision to drain.  
We fear no pain to make our gain.  
Suck it dry,  
suck the muck,  
dredge, dredge the fuckin' 'Glades—  
usher in Thy greed.

# 1886: Pound of Flesh

This is my rifle  
and it is loaded.  
George Cuthbert—  
you are hereby a carcass.  
Jean Chevalier—  
you are riddled meat.  
You are maggot fodder,  
a stench upon the land.

This is my scalpel  
and it is sharpened.  
Notorious plumers all—  
I flense your skin,  
one slice for every feather  
borne by the five million  
beautiful bodies of birds  
you slaughtered one year.

This is my poem  
in the killing fields.



**1887: To: Harriett Beecher Stowe**  
**<hbstowe@gmail.net>**

**From: Karla Linn Merrifield**  
**<vagabondpoet@yahoo.net>**

**Subject: Putting Heads Together**

Dear Ms. Stowe,

I write in response to your eco-broadside. Way to go, girl! First of its kind, or so I've found. I had no idea, not one. I thought you were just a one-trick abolitionist-sister who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Pardon my ignorance, wonder woman!

Christ, we sure could use your help to save the Everglades. We may not have slaves, but this country's still got devils to fight.

Kindly,

Karla

# 1896: Willie Bee Came to Dinner

Baffled but not conquered,  
 you crossed the 'Glades  
 more than a hundred years ago.  
 No mere explorer,  
 but a shaman of sawgrass,  
 priest of shallow waterways and  
 — snakes! — *Chit-to!*  
 You arrived at my *chick-ee*  
 to sup at my laden table:  
 limpkin, broiled;  
 great blue heron, grilled;  
 curlew, stewed with its bones.

When you had eaten  
 the three birds' tongues,  
 and sipped my sweet-bay tea,  
 I told you my real name,  
*Lot-sa Hoke-tee*,  
 terrapin woman....



### 1898: Captain W's Missing Person

In the annals of Everglades history,  
Hugh Willoughby's early Seminole lexicon  
is admirably thorough  
—but it has no word for mother.

Had the sad Miccosukee brave  
who, as his guide, reached across  
from dugout to canoe  
to shake the white explorer's hand  
lost his mother to gator or water moccasin?

Did it never occur to Willie Bee,  
as they called him, to ask  
the chieftain's wife the word  
for what she was seven times over?  
How do you say matriarch in Seminole?  
He neglected to inquire.

Or was it a small sin of omission  
by a guilty son?  
Someone he wished to forget  
and would not say her name aloud  
in his mother tongue much less  
in a native Floridian's?

I wonder what other words  
he never learned, never recorded.  
Why did he give no thought  
to that woman? Mother?

**1903: John Kunkel Small's  
Wedding Day**

I am beholding to you  
for beholding my beauty.  
No man before you  
has touched my bright yellow lip,  
caressed my fanlike leaves.  
My gentle gentleman groom,  
you swoon at the sight of me.

A breeze stirs this morning,  
lifting mist in the hardwood hammock  
from floor to crown.

A breeze stirs. Dew drops.  
I moisten, ready to be known.  
A breeze stirs; I tremble.  
You speak aloud my name:

*Dancinglady Orchid,  
my Everglades bride.*



# 1905: Dead or Alive?

To St. Bradley,  
patron of subtropical birds,  
our latter-day Assisi,  
our Everglades martyr,  
I pray.

How unceremoniously they took aim  
and shot you, those greedy hunters,  
those ravaging devils, that scourge  
of egrets great and snowy, of flamingoes,  
of hierophantic great blue herons.

Those killers in the rookeries  
are dead. But you live on  
among the glossy ibis,  
a feather spirit, listening.

### 1905: Accoutrements of Absolution

Forgive me my grandmother Amelia's  
voluminous Edwardian hat of black felt,  
its copious white plumes,  
its matching fan studded with seed pearls.

One night she nestled that lush chapeau  
in place, then swept her arm to test  
the play of billowing feathers of her fan  
the accessory to her crime,  
as a thousand miles away Guy Bradley,  
bird savior of the Everglades, was crucified.  
She indulged in the plunder of egrets,  
ignored reports of the hunters' rifle shots,  
shut her eyes to photographs  
of his riddled body left to rot  
like another bird carcass plucked clean.

I inherited her decorous finery and  
a quill's worth of Grossmutter's vanity.  
A hundred years later, I admit I am keeper  
of my grandmother's bequests,  
but grateful to my patron saint  
they, mercifully, remain out of fashion.



## 1912: Maternally Yours in Flamingo Village

Dora Jane Roberts is but a footnote  
in Florida Bay annals  
History has discounted  
the midwife of Flamingo's abilities.

Was she married?  
We don't know.  
Did she minister only to women?  
We don't know.

But babies must get born,  
even in Everglades outposts.  
To black sons of slaves,  
bronze Seminole daughters,  
brown Cuban *niños*,  
the white girls' girls,  
—and this pale poem—  
she was deliverer.

## 1913: All Aboard for Eternity

I ride  
 the ghost train  
 to Hades,  
 meet Flagler  
 at St. Augustine Station.  
 We go as far as Miami,  
 his last resort.  
 He gloats at  
 the six million  
 murderous souls  
 he spawned.  
 He gloats on  
 sprawl built by  
 his railroad folly.  
 We debark,  
 drive through the  
 gluttonous Redland fields.  
 He pounds his chest  
 in greedy pride.  
 At the park entrance  
 I stop the SUV,  
 get out.  
*Hell ends here;*  
*you cannot step inside*  
*when I enter paradise.*



**1913: An Afterlife Romance  
with Mr. Simpson**

Charles, I kiss you!  
Dare taste your pioneer tongue,  
learn your eye's language.

O, my naturalist,  
my advocate—  
as twin birds of love  
I tango with you  
across the Everglades stage,  
my hot-pink flamingo poetry  
following your intricate passion.  
I touch your shaggy beard,  
smooth your feathers.  
In this tableau of unsurpassed  
beauty set in a lasting frame—  
in Foreverglades—  
we do embrace.

1917: To: Harriet M. Bedell, Stevens Village, Alaska  
From: Dora Jane Roberts, Flamingo, Florida

Harriet, if I may be forthright,

I've received word  
of your bold, young plans  
to someday found a mission  
among the Seminoles and Miccosukees,  
sawmill workers, and prisoners.

Because I doubt I will survive  
to greet you upon your arrival here,  
I write in haste to urge you  
to let the Everglades

turn your soft Episcopalian hands  
to ones savage-rough as mine;  
to let this place's variegated peoples  
turn your pale Yankee face  
as native brown as mine;  
and to let all gods' creatures have their say.

I pray you may one day  
become the deaconess you dream of being—  
and this midwife's heiress as well.

May the coming war  
not barricade you;  
may road's end not stymie you.  
Fear not! I bequeath you  
my dugout canoe  
and my medicine bundle  
and all the powers therein  
for use in this Holy Land.



**1947: First Lady of the Glades**

You bequeathed *River of Grass*,  
salient metaphor of an Everglades  
you dreamed was eternal.  
You taught us how sawgrass  
has a thwarting bite;  
how the river defies defining,  
so imperceptibly it flows  
like a satin sheet draped across  
the peninsula's limestone torso  
into a Florida Bay  
you would not recognize today.  
Teach us again, old friend,  
Earth's subtle geography of rebirth.

**1954: Elegy for William Curtis Sturdevant**

sing moon  
sing landearth and riverearth  
sing the meaning of sun  
its sound of an angry snake  
its shining rattles  
come quickly cries the dawn  
of the sawgrass prairie

sing fangs  
sing venomdream and diamonddream  
sing the answer of brokenskin,  
its swelling wounds  
come quietly cries the pineland root  
*Eryngium cuneifolium*

sing blood  
sing paindeath and preydeath  
come sing the shamanpriests  
in Seminole  
in Latin



### 1996: In Tom's Honor

I feather your turban  
with the word *plume*,  
a flag of egret down.  
'Twas Everglades fashion  
for prophets that spring.  
You wore robes of Spanish moss.  
Years later, with the green word  
*cypress*, I pinned  
an epiphyte to your lapel.  
You doffed your hat.  
For, lo, you'd become  
park father in a suit  
of passion who knew  
where the orchids grew.  
I whispered, *Sir*; you bowed.  
Now, I escort you  
toward your visitor center,  
I sign, *Welcome*,  
*Ernest Coe*,  
wild, wise ghost on my arm.



## 2009: Bouquet for Kathleen

On the fire road  
along the ecotone  
of sawgrass and pinelands,  
wildflowers grow in profusion  
after November's burn.  
Endemic and Caribbean alike  
in winter bloom line our path.  
We wish good morning to them—  
native women, exotic señoras,  
*Buenos Dias*. And you say:

spiny false fiddleleaf, lyreleaf sage,  
starrush whitetop, blue heart,  
wand goldenrod, purple thistle.  
Behold now Everglades lilies.



## Notes on the Poems

Page 16: This poem draws on the text and illustrations of the Park's forthcoming "Plants of the Gumbo-limbo Trail" guide, written and illustrated by Kathleen Konicek-Moran, long-time volunteer in the park. All poems in this series arose from firsthand observation in the various habitats.

Page 17: Periphyton is an assemblage of algae, bacteria and their secretions, and detritus that are the basis of the Everglades food chain.

Page 18: Thomas E. Lodge's *The Everglades Handbook: Understanding the Ecosystem* was the source for the geologic history of Florida. Marcia Birkin and Anne C. Coon's book, *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry*, resulted in this, my first fractal poem. This type of pattern poem requires "cluster words" ("rain fell") to recur with some variance in the iterations. It also needs to have a scale or dimension such as distance or time, which steadily increases or decreases in the course of the poem. Here the scale is one of geologic time from Florida's deep past to its near present. Polish-born mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot first codified fractals in 1975; fractal poetry burgeoned in the early 1990s.

Page 20: *Florida Hurricanes and Tropical Storms: 1871-2001, Expanded Edition* by John M. Williams and Iver W. Duedall was an important source for this poem.

Page 25: A villanelle is a pattern poem that originated in the 1500s and requiring five tercets with a closing quatrain; the rhyme scheme is also rigidly prescribed. Perhaps the most famous villanelle is Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," which was an inspiration for this villanelle.

Page 26: This poem is in memoriam to Archie Carr, 1909-1987, biologist, conservationist, author, and "father of turtle research."

Page 28: The dire wolf (*Canis dirus*) is an extinct species of megafauna of the Pleistocene era.

Page 33: Shul is a Tibetan Buddhist term for the impression left when something has passed through, such as a cave carved out by water, a footprint in mud, the unguarded void that remains when you realize you are mortal. Shul is also Yiddish for temple.

Page 36: The New Biology knits together genomics, bioinformatics, evolutionary genetics, and other such general-purpose tools to supply novel explanations for the paradoxes that undermined Modernist biology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Poetry, too, can supply such novel explanations of life on Earth.

Page 38: Marine biologist Geoff Trager at the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve provided the details of the natural history of barnacles for this fanciful slant on their lifestyle.

Page 43: Again I must thank Marcia Birkin and Anne C. Coon for their *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry*, which explained the pattern of a Fibonacci form poem. The number of syllables (as in this poem) or words are allotted to each line in the poem so that they follow the Fibonacci sequence: 1, 1, 2, 5, 8, 13, 34, etc. The elegant formula for this pattern was introduced by Italian mathematician Leonardo of Pisa or Fibonacci 800 years ago.

Page 45: Carl Hiaasen's essay, "The Last Days of Florida Bay, published in *The Book of the Everglades*, edited by Susan Cerulean, was the factual source for "Not a Pretty Picture."

Page 46: Marjory Stoneman Douglas's *The Everglades: River of Grass* provided the seed for this single cameo (100 syllables) about the Spanish conquest.



Page 47: Many sources from over the years inform this cameo. Most recently Carlton W. Tebeau's *Man in the Everglades: 2000 Years of Human History in the Everglades National Park* opened my eyes to the vastness of the Calusa people's Florida empire and their endurance—2,000 years.

Page 48: For this double cameo poem (200 syllables) and other poems in this series, I am indebted to Michael Grunwald for his *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise*, one of my most treasured books.

Page 49: I referred to Tebeau's *Man in the Everglades* for this single cameo.

Page 50: Tebeau's *Man in the Everglades* also provided the kernel for this single cameo.

Pages 51-53: Grunwald's *The Swamp* informed these three single cameos.

Page 54: Hugh L. Willoughby, naturalist and Ex-Lieutenant Commanding, Rhode Island Naval Reserve, made an expedition across the Everglades in 1896 which was chronicled in his *Across the Everglades: A Canoe Journey of Exploration*. He ate the birds described in this single cameo and often drank sweet-bay tea.

Page 55: Willoughby's *Across the Everglades* includes "A Vocabulary of the Seminole Language," which I referred to for this double cameo.

Page 56: Naturalists John Kunkel Small and Joel Jackson Carter were the first to discover this orchid in Florida in 1903 while exploring the hammocks in Miami-Dade County; the flower is now a state-listed endangered species. Grunwald's *The Swamp* and Roger L. Hammer's field guide, *Everglades Wildflowers*, contributed to this single cameo.

Pages 57-58: *Death in the Everglades: The Murder of Guy Bradley, America's First Martyr to Environmentalism* by Stuart B. Mever was the principle source for these cameos.

Page 59: One line in Tebeau's *Man in the Everglades* led to this poem.

Page 60: This single cameo called on the biography of Henry Morrison Flagler by Gail Clement, Florida International University, which is posted on the website, *Reclaiming the Everglades: South Florida's Natural History, 1884-1934*. The industrial-agricultural-realty magnate died ignominiously in 1913, falling down a set of marble steps.

Page 61: I first met naturalist and passionate Everglades advocate Charles Torrey Simpson in the pages of Grunwald's *The Swamp*.

Page 62: My thanks to the Museum of the Everglades in Everglades City for introducing me to Deaconess Harriett M. Bedell, born in Buffalo, NY, in 1875. She served as Episcopalian missionary to the Seminoles 1933-1960. She gave the invocation at the dedication ceremony of Everglades National Park on December 6, 1947. While it is unlikely that Roberts would have written to Bedell, she could have.

Page 63: I first read Marjory Stoneman Douglas's *The Everglades: River of Grass* in college in 1974. My \$3.50 Mockingbird Book paperback edition is still serving me well.

Page 64: This single cameo owes its genesis to both Grunwald's *The Swamp* and Hammer's *Everglades Wildflowers*. Linguist and ethnographer William Curtis Sturdevant wrote *The Mikasuki Seminole: Medical Beliefs and Practices, a Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1954*.

Page 65: The Everglades National Park fact sheet, "Father of the Everglades: Ernest F. Coe (March 21, 1866-January 1, 1951)," sparked this single cameo.



Page 66: The cameo in this poem is of Kathleen Konicek-Moran, botanical illustrator and long-time volunteer in the park. Plants referenced in the poem may be seen along the Fire Road at Pine Island and were identified using Hammer's *Everglades Wildflowers*.



### Acknowledgments

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I hope you will join me in supporting Everglades National Park. Please visit [www.evergladesassociation.org](http://www.evergladesassociation.org) to find out how you can help preserve this holy land.

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*Midst*: "Out on Some Limbs and Back"

*The Newport Review*: "The Bearable Edge of Being"

Terrain.org: "'Groping for the Spirit'" in Spanish Moss"

Cover photograph "Pine Island Moon," by the author. Author's photo by Everglades National Park Ranger Greg Reed.