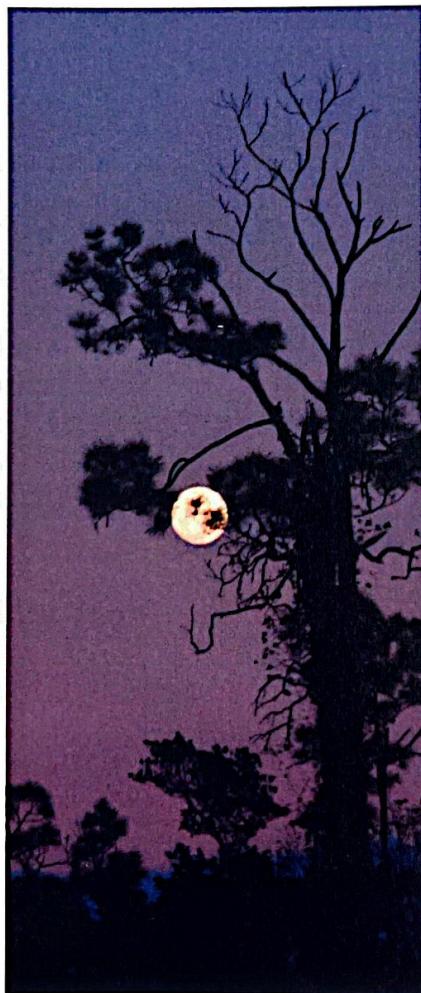


Chasing Moons in the Everglades

Poems

by Karla Linn Merrifield



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1513: Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Death

1564: The Virgin One

1832: Birdman of the Everglades
1840: The Ebony Savior
1842: US Army Expedition—58 Days, 85 Soldiers,
One Native Guide, One Woman
1881: Hiss, Hiss for Disston
1886: Pound of Flesh
1887: To: Harriett Beecher Stowe
<hbstowe@gmail.net>
From: Karla Linn Merrifield
<vagabondpoet@yahoo.net>
Subject: Putting Heads Together
1896: *Willie Bee* Came to Dinner
1898: Captain W's Missing Person
1903: John Kunkel Small's Wedding Day
1905: Dead or Alive?
1905: Accoutrements of Absolution
1912: Maternally Yours in Flamingo Village
1913: All Aboard for Eternity
1913: An Afterlife Romance With Mr. Simpson
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

Gumbolimbottree

marlberryvine

catbriarynne

ballmoss epiphyte

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

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

The Alluvial River Delta Glaciations

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.

Down at Pianosa, it was only a matter of time.

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 for Spectacular Spectacular Shows

Laaa-dieeee 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. The Spirit of Spanish Moss

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 señorita*
 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 espies
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.

They are few yet in upon years
of the percentage
of the resources

The way is this to discover
the Everglades potential
discoveries and the people
dwelling in there. — Also what to do
in the quest for progress of
an ever greater — progress
of the environment — speaking
to progress of the
environment — the Everglades
dwelling in the mangroves
in the giant cypress trees and below
the swampy bogs and bogs
and sometimes swamps
and marshes walk forth
the many who come who looks for the
place of the starting point
crossing the arms of the Gulf coast?

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

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 1/10th 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 accursed day 600 people
 adopt Florida as their home.
 In the last 60 years, we've lost
 ¼ of our forests, $\frac{2}{3}$ ^{rds} 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

subsidized out to nowhere with

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 slippy 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 soothe
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

Wednesday May 22

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; *chuck-walk*,
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 señoritas,
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 20th 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. Melver 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

To be artist-in-residence for two weeks in my favorite place on Earth was a gift from the Universe delivered to me by Donna Marxer, artist, Everglades advocate and volunteer, who administers the residency program in the park, as well as Jackie Dostourian, my Park Ranger liaison. I am also grateful to Interpretive Park Ranger Greg Reed for his knowledge and insights shared with me on a slough slog at Double Dome in the cypress forest and our bike hike through the Long Pine Key Florida slash pinelands. My thanks too to all the volunteers who were my neighbors at the Pine Island residential compound—so many of you made me feel so welcome. Thank you, thank you, thank you Jeray, Kathleen and Dick, Laura and Tom, Gale and Kirk, Alice, Leon.... It is my hope that this book repays all of you in part for your generous spirit and voluminous love of the Everglades, the planet's most remarkable ecosystem.

I hope you will join me in supporting Everglades National Park. Please visit www.evergladesassociation.org to find out how you can help preserve this holy land.

Many thanks also to the editors and publishers at the following journals, anthologies and chapbooks who published these poems (or earlier versions of them):

Dawn of Migration and Other Audubon Dreams: “Stalking Revenge on the Tamiami Trail,” “Refuge”

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.