

PERMANENT VACATION

Come Monday, after a weekend's rest, school buses will roar into the valley and the act of sharing this place with others will commence once more, just as it should, as a new batch of students embark on their own foray into this untamed slice of the world and live for a time in a cabin in the woods. Meanwhile I'm practicing for the coming revolution, or the one that's perhaps already here, by courting a life lived in closer kinship with raw earth, which, come to think of it, doesn't depend on dwelling inside a national park, though it sure makes for a nice place to begin.

No More Sunsets

Stephanie Anderson

In South Florida, I belong to the swamp. I paddle canoes through mangroves in Everglades National Park, the branches closing in on the trail, so I grab them and pull the canoe forward. The water, just inches deep in places, has the color and transparency of weak tea. Once an alligator swam under my canoe, first the broad snout, then the spikes on its back (called scutes), then the tail waving lazily back and forth. Another time I was fishing along a canal and heard an alligator's growl from the sawgrass but couldn't see her. She was close. My husband and I backed away slowly, then ran, terrified and amazed by her voice.

Since leaving the South Dakota prairie seven years ago, I have learned new flora and fauna: pond apple, gumbo limbo, air plant, armadillo, coral snake, ibis. I understand why people say Everglades mosquitos are evil. Spanish moss hanging from cypress trees can move me to tears, especially when the sun shines through it. I have plans to buy snake boots. When I can find something to climb and overlook the swamp, I hope for puffy white clouds that reflect in the still water. I hope for buzzards because they are so graceful in the air.

I am curating connections. Great blue herons are my favorite swamp birds: their clean, smoke-blue silhouettes, the flash of their yellow beaks, the directness of their gaze that sees things I can't in the water. I've camped on the Florida Bay

in the national park and listened all night to fish jumping as they were hunted by bigger fish. The smell of decaying swamp muck hits my nose and I no longer cringe. I turn my face to the river of grass and breathe deeper.

In South Florida, there are no seasons.¹ But it's only the unfocused who believe that, who say it in complaining tones. We have a wet season, a dry season, and transition times in between. The landscape is green year-round—no snowy winters or fall colors—but things change, if you look. Cypress trees lose their needles in the winter, birds like the horned grebe and blackburnian warbler pass through during fall and spring migrations, water levels in the swamp rise in summer and fall in winter. Manatees glide inland to warm fresh-water springs when ocean temperatures drop below sixty-eight degrees; in high summer, sea turtles scoot ashore and lay eggs.

I divide the year in two—the time it feels good to sleep in a tent and the time I risk suffocation by doing so. Summer is the hated season here, and I see why: the heat that wilts spirits, hair, and clothing; humidity that chokes; and a sun so strong you feel like the cliché egg frying on a sidewalk. Still, there's something nice about knowing I will not be cold for at least four months. There's comfort in the afternoon rains, awe in watching a cloudbank suck water from the Everglades and dump it over the coast. I enjoy being less frenzied. The tourists are gone, some businesses close for a week or two, events are few and far between. Farmers' markets shut down, church congregations shrink, selling something becomes difficult,

1 South Florida has no official boundaries, but the term generally refers to the Miami metropolitan area (Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties), the Florida Keys, and the Everglades.

reservations are no longer required. Most birds (and snow birds) abandon us. We all go still.

And yet, the nights. Sweat and skimpy clothes, icy drinks that seem to seep water from hidden pores. The wildness of a bar with a dance floor and no walls on three sides. We become nocturnal, snoozing through the day, stretching as evening falls, heading into the night to hunt and howl. Around us everything grows, fueled by heat and rain, tropical and steaming. Perhaps we're more animal than we think.

In South Florida it's hard to get away from people. Taking a boat out on the ocean is the surest way to find solitude, but I don't have the money or skills for boat ownership. You won't enjoy much privacy at our national park, or our state parks, or our wildlife refuges, or anywhere billed as a natural area. Our choices for experiencing nature are limited and thus crowded—large portions of nature are under water, so we jam onto boardwalks and lookout points, cameras poised, making so much noise. Like right now, at Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, on a bench overlooking the water, I hear a lawnmower behind me and see people on the trail across the marsh. I hear traffic on US 441 and see some fenced-off stuff that looks related to electricity. Someone is flying a drone in the parking area.

I'm not feeling very peaceful, although this is a better view than the apartments next to my townhouse. A turtle pops its head above the water and lily pads tremble on the surface. At times like this I miss my parents' ranch: thousand-acre prairie pastures with scattered cows, antelope, deer, grass, sky and the occasional barbed wire fence. No people except me, riding my paint mare. No sounds except the wind in my ears, the chirping of meadowlarks, the rustle of grass.

Sometimes—no, most times—I just want to be in stillness. I am not talking about the stillness of a quiet room. I am talking about a stillness of the soul that, for me, only nature can provide. I have tried, but I cannot feel stillness alongside concrete and traffic and masses of people, the conditions of urban life. I only feel trapped. But in the swamp or on the prairie or in a forest, stillness comes to my soul even when nature is frenzied with life. The less a place bears evidence of humans—the wilder it is—the more stillness I seem to find in it.

I have a few secret spots in South Florida, but the truth is I'm not skilled (or brave) enough for the truly wild places. Like taking a kayak from the mainland to the Florida Keys, a thirty-mile journey across open ocean. I don't have to tell you about the dangers of open ocean. The Florida Trail, which in the South Florida section requires waders and snake boots. The Wilderness Waterway, a hundred-mile-trail along the west edge of Everglades National Park from Flamingo to Everglades City. The waterway is a tough-to-follow maze through mangroves and sawgrass across waters teeming with alligators, crocodiles, and cottonmouths, with voracious mosquitoes and no cell service. By canoe it takes a week. If you can find them, you sleep on chickees—elevated wooden platforms perched over the swamp. You bring all your supplies.

Herein lies my great Goldlocks conundrum: I'm too wild for some places and too tame for others. The fact that I need a just-right disappoints me; I want to be unafraid and capable. I want to start a fire with sticks and identify edible plants and skin a snake. Maybe I will. I just need more time to forget the way we've taught ourselves to live and remember how to survive.

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When you first arrive in South Florida, everything is an alligator. Dark shadow at the bottom of the pool: alligator. Log in the canal: alligator. Shredded strip of rubber on the side of the road: alligator. Most natives (those that frequent the swamp, anyway) don't have this problem, but for newcomers it's terrifying. After enough sojourns into the swamp, you get your eyes. Sticks are no longer a gator's scutes poking above the water, lily pads waving in the breeze aren't being parted by a broad nose. That snap of fear comes less often.

Once you start seeing the actual alligators, they're in places you were not looking before: underwater waiting to grab the fish that swallows your baited hook, tucked in the sawgrass by a pathway, floating under a tree waiting for baby birds to fall. You realize you were incredibly stupid on those outdoor sojourns. You find it stunning that Florida alligators have killed only twenty-three people since 1948; you were probably closer than you know to being number twenty-four.

You don't need to have eyes for alligators or anything in nature, though. In South Florida we can completely avoid the natural world if we want. Driving takes us through chic downtowns and palm-lined neighborhoods, past warehouse wastelands and above-ground garbage dumps. Air conditioning keeps the heat and humidity away, citywide pesticide applications kill the evil mosquitoes, and boardwalk restaurants and bars welcome us with mojitos should the beach get too hot. An army of landscapers keeps the hedges shorn, the coconuts cut (otherwise they fall on cars and heads), the grass clipped, and the palm trees trimmed of dead fronds. Pest companies whisk away possums and snakes and cockroaches. Nature is neat and tidy, kept in its place.

I've met native South Floridians who have never been to Everglades National Park. How is that possible? my heart

cries. Weren't you even curious? Not everyone here is ambivalent about the outdoors, but most people seem confused when I say the city makes me crazy, that I have to flee it every few weeks, go camping, hiking, canoeing, something. That nothing downtown, not even those summer nights, will ever excite me as much as watching a great blue heron pluck a fish from the water and swallow it. Writer and environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas, whose work contributed to the founding of Everglades National Park and other area conservation projects, wrote in her book *The Everglades: River of Grass*, "There are no other Everglades in the world. They are, they have always been, one of the unique regions of the earth; remote, never wholly known." I can't imagine living next to such a place and not caring to roam it.

But I think I understand how not-caring happens. Mustering the desire to brave Miami traffic to reach the Everglades is difficult when just watching a sunset is problematic. The South Florida land is as flat as a coffee table—it slopes less than two inches per mile—and is designed to move water in a four-thousand-square-mile sheet at near zero to two feet per minute.² An ingenious setup for a swamp that once lazed from central Florida to the Keys, but now that we've drained, cleared, and "developed" this land, even one-story buildings hide the horizon. Unless you drive west, to the levee that holds back the Everglades, or climb to a west-facing balcony, or park on top of a parking garage, the city consumes the sunset. The sky goes gradually darker, and we suspect the sun has gone but cannot say when.

2 Statistics are from the Florida Museum of Natural History's online article "South Florida Aquatic Environments: Florida Everglades." Note that four thousand square miles was the original size of the Everglades; less than half of it remains today, and the sheet flow is practically nonexistent because of drainage, the damming of Lake Okeechobee, and urban and agricultural development. <https://www.flnh.ufl.edu/fish/southflorida/everglades.html>

I missed sunsets when I first moved to South Florida. In these years I have learned some about the Everglades, but I have also learned indifference. City life normalizes invisible sunsets, then goes further by making me forget that I am tethered to the sun and the natural world it makes possible. A sunset is beautiful, even to the most nature-averse people, the most hardcore extractionists who believe the earth is simply a tool to advance humankind's survival. When something as lovable as a sunset becomes invisible and therefore unimportant, we can more easily divorce ourselves from swamp grass, possums, aningas, and decaying muck—the things that aren't as easy to love. We can move among concrete buildings and pretend that a park or "natural area" tucked between streets is nature.

Why do I make my life in the city? That question spins in my head like the white balls on the roulette wheels in South Florida's casinos, and I don't know where to place my bet. City or country? Urban or rural? Society or solitude? Is it possible to have both? Do I want both?

Sunsets. I know I want that much for certain. And so I return to Everglades National Park, some of the truest wilderness we have left, and watch the evening light bathe the sawgrass, see the reflection of pink and orange in the water, hear the splash of a bass and the call of an aninga. I embrace the stillness, allow the sinking sun to hold me, allow myself and, for a minute anyway, my questions to sink with it.

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Eighteen Writers on Work and Life in Our National Parks

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Editor

Maeko Bradshaw



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Orders, inquiries, and correspondence should be addressed to:

Bona Fide Books

PO Box 550278, South Lake Tahoe, CA 96155

(530) 600-4070

www.bonafidebooks.com

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for the preservation of our national parks.*