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A Clear Place in the Sun

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Bard College

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A Clear Place in the Sun

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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A Clear Place in the Sun

By Sarina Schwartz

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Land Acknowledgement

Land acknowledgements are but a small part of disrupting colonial structures, but given the fact that this project is focused on a particular landscape and my relationship with that landscape, I think it is vital to acknowledge the following:

The land upon which I grew up and which this project centers is the traditional homeland of the Calusa and Tequesta peoples and is today the sovereign homeland of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida. Additionally, the majority of this project was written on or around the campus of Bard College, the sacred homeland of the Munsee and Muhheaconneok people. Due to forced removal, they now reside in Northeast Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community.

To Mom and Dad, for giving me Florida and for giving me yourselves,

‡ to Simon, for being my home.

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Preface

The Everglades has gone by many names. The Seminole called it *Pahokee*, meaning “grassy waters.” Spanish invaders called it *Laguna del Espiritu Santo*, or the Lake of the Holy Spirit. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, in her groundbreaking book, called it “the River of Grass,” although technically, the sawgrass that inspires these names is a sedge and not a grass. The first recorded use of the term “Everglades” is dated to the 1800s, and it is commonly thought that “Ever” was a misreading of “River.” But “Everglades” stuck. The word “glade”¹ comes from Middle English, meaning “a gleam of light, bright space, an open space; a bright patch of sky.” It is from this root that the title of this project is derived: *A Clear Place in the Sun*.

I grew up on the border between the suburbia of eastern South Florida and the Everglades. It is a liminal space between all that is absurd in human development and all that is surreal in a landscape such as the Everglades. When most people think of the Everglades, they think of a swamp, infested with snakes and mosquitos and alligators. And it most certainly is that. But it is also an awe-inspiring, unparalleled landscape of multiple interconnected ecosystems: sawgrass marshes, cypress swamps, pineland prairies, mangrove forests, and the Florida Bay. It is an ecosystem not currently found anywhere else in the world. It is “a land of strangeness,”² of utterly breathtaking beauty. It is, at times, also terrifying. Florida as whole, as landscape of nature and of people, is just as breathtaking and terrifying. Florida has a horrifying history of colonialism, racism, and abuse of the land. But it also has a rich history of diversity, of indigeneity, of queerness, and of wonder.

I may never live permanently in Florida again, a fact about which I have many complicated feelings. But regardless of whether I do or do not, Florida will always live in me. At times, I hate Florida, mostly for its politics, for what its governing body does to the people who make Florida Florida (and occasionally, I hate it for the heat and the mosquitos). But most times, I could not have imagined growing up anywhere else. And all of the time, I love Florida with my whole heart.

A Landscape is a Verb

This is all a god would know

a mere geologic yesterday

 this sawgrass country

 was birthed from water

it rose in ancient &

 inviolable silence,

 this clear place in the sun

in time's half-sleep

 on the furrowed back of coral,

carving sweet water rivers

muck & grass:

 sculptors in limestone.

Overrun edges of swamp mosquitoes

 & yellow orb weavers

& *r. Mangle* & the roseate

 spoonbill & the strangler fig

 which stands, a cathedral

here in the slant stillness,

 life & death go unrecognized

by passing eyes.

Welcome to Fairyland

Where we have no edges,
 only rounded breasts
 and gaping mouths,
 salt and fruitsap dripping
down the chin, bathing
 in this Fountain
 of Youth, our skin
 turned upwards
toward a burnt sky.

Join us and drink
 from the shells
 of mollusks and excise
 your many sins —
these rivers of grass
 will carry them elsewhere,
 somewhere unknown to us,
 consequence unseen.

Here, you need only
 to revel in excess:
 of sun, of white coral sand,
 of flesh and pink,

here in this

illusion of nowness,
 this bird-cage house,
 reality is clouded
and apart from ourselves.

Thingness

anhinga, the American sycamore, Andrew,
banyan, bald cypress,
burmese python,
Choctawhatchee beach mouse,
diamondback terrapin,
elkhorn coral, Everglade snail kite
Ficus aurea, the Florida scrub jay,
gumbo limbo tree, guava,
hawksbill sea turtle,
ibis, *Iguana iguana*, Irma,
jackfruit, jacaranda,
key deer, Katrina,
live oak, long leaf pine,
mangrove, marsh rabbit,
nurse shark,
Oceanites oceanicus,
Palmetto, *passiflora edulis*,
quahogs,
roseate spoonbill,
sandhill crane, Spanish moss, sea grape,
tricolored heron,
urchin,
vulture,
Wilma, white sapote,
xenomystax congroides,
yellowtail snapper,
the zebra mussel

A landscape is a verb

landscape of constant motion
memory landscape

landscape of time
materializing
and of impenetrable tangle

landscape of becoming
long-fabled and unknown
of profound and wild silence

landscape of subversion

landscape re-inscribed
re-imagined, re-configured
landscape re-ruptured

of myth
outlaw landscape
a crowd of changing forms

landscape of unrelenting vastness
queer landscape

landscape of the primordial
of sun-blazing solitudes

landscape of stale ghosts
uncanny landscape
of bodies displaced
and transfigured

landscape of suggestion

landscape of stuttered syncopation
of waiting
of gesture

Living Waters

after Clyde Butcher

“Indian Key 5, 1997”

Is such a thing still a tree?

beautiful white sculptural pieces that lay as monuments

Tangled mass
of limbs, bleached
and hulking,
the corpse of a beast
washed ashore:

all that we cannot
hope to know
embodied.

“Florida Bay, 1994”

The wind has shifted on the seascape,
rippling the green foam.
Red mangroves line the waterways,
roots exposed,
veins outside the skin.
A being with many arms,
it digs into the surface of the world,
creeping ever closer, Stygian.
Within these warped limbs,
a Great Blue Heron stands unmoving,
a yellow eye faced toward you.

“Ghost Orchid Dancing”

High in the snarl of a cypress hammock,
a ghost orchid blinks.

We take it with us:
this god-abandoned landscape.

I have always lived on the edge
of what is known,
the resilient decay
of our human existence
stretched out ever further
into the uncharted,
compressing it to the space
between our known names.

Learning to See Absence

Propylaea

The Colosseum, at one point,
contained its own microclimate.
A universe of difference
over a mere 500 feet, the amalgam
of flora a botanical wonder.

*A primeval jungle ruin
where strange lights dance,
landscape rather than building.*

That labyrinthine ruin most solemn,
overtaken by fig & olive, cypress & thistle,
now uprooted, the wildness
of memory become barren.

This evening along route 27,
the borders of the Everglades
beckon to us, end
of the world,
the pale corpses of leafless
swamp bay trees,
propylaea to the primordial.

Hunt

I.

Tourists love
 the iguanas,
not knowing that
 they too
are visitors, non-
 native and mal-
adaptive, accidental
 stowaways on fruit-
bearing ships,
 a casualty
of our growing appetite;
 not knowing that,
in Florida's mild
 winters, local weather
stations put out "falling
 iguana warnings:"
not dead, but
 merely cold-
stunned, they
 drop like stones,
become the statued victims
 of speeding Mercedes
and malicious
 teenage boys;
not knowing that,
 if they wander
into our gardens,
 we are at liberty
to hunt them.

II.

In oppressive summer heat,
tourists spill from luxury buses,
ants emerging from the hill,
endless. Heavy binoculars and cameras,
an albatross around their necks.

They cheer grotesquely, a spectacle,
sweat staining their backs and the air,
food-flecked spittle liberated
from shouting mouths.

As the alligator lunges for the meat,
his handler pushes the rod
just outside its reach —

Such Ruins

I dove my first shipwreck
when I was 15, floating through
what once were opulent rooms,
now home to twelve species of
sub-tropical sea life, schools of parrot fish
in the cargo hold, goliath grouper,
spotted eagle rays. There are places
in the world where you can explore
flooded temples, sunken statues
and graveyards, eerie underwater mysteries,
for those who like beauty
with a touch of the macabre.
The truth of our impermanence
echoes in the silence of such ruins,
a world hung in the balance.

Under a winter sun,
I sit facing the Gulf
from my grandparents' beach bungalow,
their doomed attempt at snowbirding:
in a few years, they won't remember
owning this house,
the shard of coral that lodged itself
in the dog's foot, the bougainvillea
framing the door.

But for now, I watch the movement
of the sea, an inch higher
than last winter.

Dear Jamie,

Some nights, I think about us,
the riotous wild things we were,
how convinced we were
that we could save this place.
How we raced down the boardwalk
at Anhinga Trail nature park,
leaving our parents in our frenzied wake.
We collected sun-bleached moth wings
and the scales of green anoles
to mix with marsh water
and brew into fairy potions.
We thought it would turn the geckos
on our front doorsteps into dragons,
and we'd ride them across the glades,
protectors of the swamp.

Dear Jamie,

What I remember most:

the streets, flooded
with a couple inches of water,
palm fronds and coconuts
and bits of white metal fencing
rushing by, creating a whirlpool
of detritus at the drainage grate

playing hideout in our shuttered-up house,
our cans of Campbell's creamy tomato soup
and battery-powered lamps

whipping water
against the metal hurricane shutters,
like a thousand little hands pounding,
desperate to get in

that I was worried about you:
your dad was old Florida,
didn't think he needed shutters
and left the glass of your windows
bare to the storm

(I was a jealous that you could see
and I couldn't—I asked you for days after
what you saw in the eye)

that when it had passed,
your dad loaded up all the neighborhood
kids into the back of his pickup,
sloshing through the river of our street,
so high up on those pumped-up wheels,

the trunks of my favorite trees
scarred where their branches used to be.

I remember thinking
the children were supposed to help, somehow,
but now I don't think that's why we were really there.

We were supposed to see —

this is what the world really is,
this is what's out there for you.

Dear Jamie,

The last time I saw you,
we went for a walk at Shark Valley
on one of those January mornings
with a few spiderwebs of frost
on the banana leaves.

You cut off all your curls
and I do not understand
the meanings behind your new tattoos.

Years ago, on another morning,
we traced our names
on the cold window panes of my father's car.

This time, the sawgrass prairie was filled
with our heavy silence, weighted down with
lack — the gap in our shared memories palpable.

Now, your name is an echo I hold alone.
You have always walked slightly ahead of me.

Elysium

They should really do something about the signs —
they ruin the magic, all those anti-abortion billboards
with their tainted women and pathetic babies,
and the ones screaming that Jesus loves me, but first
I'm in need of saving, and also that I should go
to the Crazy Horse Gentleman's Club just off
the next exit. They should really do something
about all these signs that stand like a Sphinx,
a test of will, before your entrance to
this promised land that is Orlando,
promised land of concrete, magic, and funnel cakes,
this fantasy that suspends life, that takes away all edges.
Inside hallowed gates, we wander, thinking
we might never find our way out again, but maybe
we don't mind that so much. How could we,
with Minnie Mouse and Scooby Doo feeding us
lotus flowers and corn dogs, forbidden fruit.
The self is lost here, peeled away and forgotten,
replaced with excess and plastic and under it all,
the scent of iron and decay.
They should really do something about those signs —
they're the sentinels, Cerberus's rearing heads,
through which not all might gain entry
to this wretched new kingdom.

Under the throbbing Florida sun,
we sweat and sweat, our clothing sticking like a second skin.
We hurtle through a calculated reality,
and in this special dark, a terrifying revelation:
this world does not need me —
I am inconsequential to its immeasurability.
Disney World: the site of my first shame.
When we left, I knew I was dying,

my brain pounding its way out of my skull,
my eyes pulsing. Laying down in the backseat,
watching the passing of the signs,
Jesus is alive and this is my punishment
for my descent into a false promised land, my fall.

Karst Topography

Once, a sinkhole pulled a man twenty feet underground, his body unrecovered. Florida is built on limestone, you see, the porous carbonate a delicate latticework. You can only pile so many tons of luxury apartment complexes and Pollo Tropicals and Outback Steakhouses onto limestone before it starts to buckle, before it starts to suck you and your Hooters and your Bonefish Grill down, the latticework collapsing, the core collapse of a supernova. They say it's a sinkhole epidemic — we are a virus, a plague, and the bloodstream of this place wants us out.

Thingness

Andytown, the bone yard,
Christ of the Abyss, Collins Avenue,

the Dome Houses, Ellaville,
the Freedom Tower,
gator wrangling shows,

Homestead, the Intercoastal,
Jaxson's ice cream, key lime pie,

Little Havana, Liberty City,
Morikami Park, Neptune Memorial Reef

Okeechobee Battlefield,
Publix, Quail Ridge,
the Redland District,

Stiltsville, saltwater taffy,
tropicana orange juice,

Universal Studios, Villa Vizcaya,
Wonder House,
xenon mobile, Yamato Colony,
Zion

Learning to See Absence

The disaster has already happened,
we cannot escape our compulsion
for inviting it in — what is more
tantalizing than being nothing?
To live in Florida is to live in apocalypse,
to mark time by cycles of cataclysm
instead of by seasons — hurricane,
swamp fire, spring breakers.
Citrus blight, washed-up Portuguese
man-o-war under the soles of the feet.
We are haunted by things unseen,
intoxicated by the hyperobject:
bleached coral and rising sea levels,
our narrow lens into the infinite
recess of our own causality,
unknowable and
imperfect —

We try so hard to make it otherwise,

to make all things plastic, reified:
identical houses in identical neighborhoods,
the recreation of déjà vu in a lab —
yet everything that is perfect
is deadened, a dragonfly
trapped in amber,
and so — I listen to the Resurrection
Symphony in the middle of the swamp,
the sky heavy with storm
and wade in the mire,
a strangler fig enfolding a cypress tree.
Rise again, my dust, after a brief rest.

The Wild Thrum

“This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me”

— Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Flickering

After the dancing has faded
into nothing,
after the stars have slowly
unfolded, we slip
down the Ft. Lauderdale
Boardwalk to the ocean,
past the shuttered
Sand Bar and Pelican Landing Grill,
hiking up our skirts and kicking off our heels
to stand in the natal warmth
of the sea, moon-
drunk and laughing, entranced
by the sound of the waves,
the night air like an exhalation.

Our chests are a tidal, pulsing thing,
over which we have no control —
these days, time is montage,
the disjointed flickering
we pull at desperately
that slips through our fingers
like grains of sand, lost to us.

What would it be like to swim
in our gowns, the fabric
billowing up like a jewel-toned
floatie, the dark sea
slowly seeping into our chiffons,
our lace, our satin, pulling us
ever downwards
until we sink
beneath the foamy waves,
jellyfish-like in our textile tendrils,

to rest on the sandy bottom,
still but for a current
not of our own making.

in this short life, diptych

I.

Tearing down Alligator Alley at midnight we glow in the headlights of
oncoming traffic We drive until we've crossed the state twice
home and back again we drive until our throats ache from laughing
but it is a temporary hurt — we are not yet afraid of what our
bodies might become Mortality is beyond our imagining; for now we are
vast without end suspended in this

II.

On the bed, we mirror
each other's bodies.
Our hands touch our hands,
our own hands,
touch our own faces,
rediscovering ourselves
for each other,
rediscovering each other, too,
and this is what it is to worship —
not quite god
and not quite human.

What a Thing the Human Heart Is

A rabbi once told me

that when your heart breaks

it's rent open,

peeled apart by manicured fingers,

what's within,

ventricles and aorta,

exposed.

When no one is looking

I am tired of being brave —

I turn nineteen

in the artificial fluorescence

of a hospital room,

squeezed on the edge

of my mother's bed,

rumpled blankets

on the chair in the corner

where my father spent the night.

We watch *The Intouchables*,

which she will not remember,

morphine staining her bloodstream

Elegy

I.

*you don't have any
birds inside you*

she says, this child
I look after,

as we sit on the hardwood floor,
a slow ache

spreading in my back.
Outside the window, the sun lowers

behind the live oak draped
in Spanish moss.

We play with Bakugan
and dinosaur figurines,

recreating a species'
extinction endlessly,

a child's imagining of death,
as simply *elsewhere* —

II.

As a child, I swallowed
citrus seeds,

 lemon
 white grapefruit
 honey tangerines

waiting for a grove
to take root inside me,
tangled with the seams

of my organs, nests
of orioles and scrub jays

in my bloodstream,
an ecosystem,

a whole universe,
contained within the body

the margins of the self
muddled with margins of the other.

III.

Before, she giggled
when she moved close,

moved away, moved close,
giggled —

struck by the strangeness
of touching a woman
not her mother.

Now, on the edge of sleep,
she absentmindedly presses

her fingers into the soft skin
of my thigh.

How fragile her bones feel
under my palm —

the vertebrae, the ribs,
the wrists.

She breathes slowly,
no trace of mischief left in her face.

Then comes a fly, leisurely circling
the remnants of her mac and cheese.

I dare not swat it away —

The truth of the river is the grass*after Marjory Stoneman Douglas*

It's tempting, I know,
to plunge your hand into it,
to run your fingers along
the plush leaves.

Once, I did too:
I threw my whole body into it
to be submerged
within great enclosed arms,

but it is nothing but itself,
the sandpaper surface of emery,
marring the skin.

Heart of the glades,
it lives in the muck and sunlight
and dies in it also,
becoming velvet sea
at the horizon,
the blank space on the map.

Citrus Sinensis

To peel an orange,
 navel, a winter fruit,
I bite into the bitter
skin, make an incision
with my teeth.

 My partner thinks it's strange,
 he uses his fingernails.

But I prefer resistance:
small burst
of zest, aromatic
and tart on my tongue,
in my nose.

Nothing this sweet
should come easily.

The Wild Thrum

1.

Here, spring rushes open
in a green so violent,
it feels almost
foreboding, phosphenes
pressed against my eyelids
even in sleep.

In the abandoned orchard,
overripe fruit is a too-sweet mud
under the toes, bees feeding
on the residuum.

2.

We are transfigured
by our own absurdity.
The uncanny stranger
that greets us in the mirror
tells us of her dreams,
but she is only a voice,
severed from us.

We cannot escape
death, and so we eschew
the eternal. The most living
is now, the body our certainty.

3.

I sit outside a coffeeshop
somewhere in New England
and write about Florida,
write about the whooping crane,
the gumbo limbo tree.

I write about the Florida
that I carry inside me

the Florida that is always
becoming.

4.

The mind is a maker of metaphor,
it plays the game of creation —
is this not why we tell stories?

At the end of a poem,
I turn to the sea,
to make human that oceanic feeling:
life, the tide in death, the tide out.

Here in the middle
of nothing (everything),
what is created must always perish:
yet to live is an act of piety —
or perhaps, an act of revolt.

5.

I no longer know
what I can call a home.

I am displaced, a wanderer
in a strange land,
transient.

Yet this wild heart of Florida
explodes with remembrance.
How could I be lost here?

6.

Nostalgia is the reverberation
of longing in the sleeping world.

I open the door to madness,
with this love and grief,
this habit of living,
which I bear alone.

7.

I gather the universe to me,
a coat of many colors —

hell is in store, I think,
but perhaps,

this is stretching it too far.

We cannot know
the state of non being:

the narrative is interrupted,
and we tell it again
because we do not yet
understand.

This is our leave-taking,
a shout into the absence.

Notes

- 1 ¹ Middle English Dictionary. Ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001. Online edition in Middle English Compendium. Ed. Frances McSparran, et al.. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018.
<<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>>. Accessed 01 May 2022.
- ² Grunwald, Michael. *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise*. Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- 31 “In this short life” takes its title from the Emily Dickinson poem of the same name.
- 33 “What a thing the human heart is” takes its title from a passage in Geothe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated by David Constatine.