

*By Tess Segal*

I have been uprooted.

I was planted in the wetlands. You can pretty much throw a rock from my parents' house and hit the Everglades, a vast river of grass. It doesn't even seem like a river, if you're not breathing along with its rise and fall, living-with and watching. It's palmetto, bromeliads, firebush. Take that for a Biblical vision. I soaked in brackish water and lived in the cool drip of mangrove rootways. I worried for my anoxic neighbors. I flowed.

Folks unfamiliar with South Florida don't know about the improbable gentleness of sawgrass. It doesn't cut if you move with the direction of the growth, time your slogging to the drown-out din of cicada screech and bullfrogs. They don't know about the late light that sets everything on fire, what glows purple: Muhly grass, milkweed, wild petunia, beautyberry— the alien magnificence of a passionflower. Come the wind and the torrential downpours, they don't know what clings on. Whose roots stay put.

Mine didn't. After years as a swamp-kid, I moved to North-Central Florida to study the environment more formally— I liked the way “hydrogeomorphology” and “turbidity” and “Life Cycle Assessment” sounded in my mouth. More than that, I loved the longleaf pines and sweetgum and red maples. I learned that the petals of a magnolia's flowers are so massive because they're literally older than bees; they had to support the weight of beetles to be pollinated. I learned that all evolution is co-evolution.

My vine-smell summers in Gainesville started with the precious few weeks of eating mulberries straight off the tree. Peoples in Florida have been doing just that for centuries— in relation with mulberry as food and dye and bow-branches. I mashed the fruit between my lips to stain them, kissed the juice onto my friends' cheeks as rouge. I thought about all the bygone girls who'd thought to do the same, standing by the same trees, in the same sigh-humid air, looking forward to cooling off in the same springs. Maybe they felt at home in that metallic, earthy smell right after a thunderstorm like me. Maybe they saw themselves as swamp-things too.

I'm outside my native habitat now. For mostly-unscrupulous reasons on behalf of the State, I had to transfer schools. I'm now remembering Florida flora from afar.

Here, in Kentucky, I'm out in the cold. In the first moments of the first snow flurry—shockingly early, maybe October—I thought I was seeing flecks of ash. I remembered how the whole world goes acrid and dense during wildfires in the Everglades. In Broward County, the sky might glow mean well into the night. In my kid-logic, I sometimes thought of that kind of thing as comeuppance. My hometown, like much of Broward County, is suburban sprawl paved over the Everglades. There's a creeping sense that the swamp is just resting, that a verdant reclamation will come. Our situation is temporary; what buzzes and slithers and reaches towards the light, those things are truly ancient-and-future.

But then: I learned that pawpaws, a wonderfully weird fruit tree native to Florida, may have first evolved right where I live now, in the Kentuckian heart of the Ohio River Basin. But then: there are beautyberries here, too, and every time I pass a patch of them on campus, I hear the whine of my grandparents' golf cart zipping around an unincorporated small town outside Alachua. But then: you know what they say, you can take the girl out of Florida...

In fact, much of the Appalachian mountains were formed on Pangea. There are parts of Eastern Kentucky that look a lot like the rolling greens of Ireland, because they were split from the same rock. A bifurcated zygote, our land-twin. So much here is ancient, haunted, literally old as dirt—older than that, really. It's been a shocking contrast to the vibrant, verdant, newness of life in Florida. Constant reinvention, plants keeling over to feed the roots of their neighbors, a new bud replacing that one, vines crawling and scheming all over each other, everyone vying for the highest light. When I think about Florida plants, that's what I'm struck by: the overwhelming aliveness.

Still, people wrinkle their nose when they hear where I'm from. Have they met the captains who refuse to go down with the ship come the roaring indifference of hurricane season? Those who hunker down in trailer parks and lean-tos, who are told "Leave it, you're more important than this place?" Because their answer is always: "I am this place." The stubbornness is the same as the love. The mycelial dedication.

The first time I came back to south Florida since moving to Kentucky, I went to the Everglades with my friend Oliver. The drive through the park was pure ecotone. We watched the scraggly pines turn to mangrove domes before pulling off to hike through a mahogany hammock. Parts of the footpath looked like they were already being reclaimed, covered in lichens and mosses, the supports for the handrails intertwined with strangling fig. When I was younger, I would tiptoe outdoors. I felt like every twig I snapped was me imposing my weight where it didn't belong, like I was hurting the trail just by being there. Now, both my studies and my love for these places tell me otherwise. They tell me what I maybe only knew when I was tiny: that we are all creatures. I am an animal, helping break down the carbon-rich leaf litter into the ground by coming though. I am gentle, but being a little heavy-footed is not a crime. I belong out there.

As Oliver and I moved under the ancient dignity of the mahogany canopy, I found myself struck by a weird sorrow. One tree was especially massive, maybe centuries old. I laid a hand on its bark and silently apologized. "I hear your name and think of your carcass," I imagined saying to it. "I'm sorry I didn't imagine you alive."

So many people appreciate Florida in terms of its sellable product. Thinking of our plants and our ecosystems as commodities—the polished wood, not the living tree. Only fools love Florida for what they can squeeze out of it. (That's also true literally; commercial citrus is composed solely of nonnative species.)

Oli and I kept going south, wanting to reach Florida Bay by sunset. It occurred to me, this first visit back since moving to Kentucky, that there are different kinds of flatness. The floral

landscape of south Florida is flat the way the ocean is flat— quiet and primordial. Nature in the midwest feels flat the way depression is flat— affectless and vulnerable. Compared to how I feel surrounded by Florida's native plants, there's just less of me up there.

I was wearing brown-lensed sunglasses, so the memory was in nostalgic sepia even as it was happening. Not including the Keys, we were looking out from the southernmost point of the continental United States. Watching the water lap at mangroves, I felt sorry for all the times I'd denigrated South Florida, conflating the pavement with what it covered.

You know, I didn't really understand until I left what a rare and special thing it was to be able to go to the beach all the time. There's a feeling of being held by the earth when lying in bed after a beach day, still sensing the waves. That tectonic gravity reminds me of what Annie Dillard wrote in *Tinker Creek* about lying under trees: "I am really here, alive on this intricate Earth." For anyone who's never been in the ocean, the closest analog I can reach is the moments after taking rollerskates off, when you still feel like there are wheels under your feet. It's like that, except you're connected to some vast similitude beyond any human scale.

That's what it feels like to miss Florida. I still feel the ebb and flow of it at my back, and I can't make people understand what that's like. Me waxing poetic about sweetgum and swamp lilies and saw palmettos isn't going to make them get it. There's a certain language to the greenness here that you might have to see to believe.

Much of me is ultimately, intimately, entwined with Florida. I intend, after a good long while, to be reclaimed by its soil, to be wormfood among the cypresses. Until then, I think that everything I touch, every class I'm in, everyone I love, will feel a little bit of the green afterglow of a Florida childhood.