

Welcome—Don't Fear— Untamed Nature



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CARL SANDBURG ONCE WROTE that we humans have a menagerie inside us. What he meant was that each one of us carries the seeds of our species. We have within us the urge to mother, nurture, kill and be killed, if necessary, and all of these intangible forces are part of our restless, ruthless and sometimes selfless spirit.

There is a lion within, as well as without. And there is a wolf at the gate of our mouth that yearns for blood.

Wherever you make your home in Florida, you can be a witness: You can see something of the natural world that perhaps no one else has seen. But those of us who live in a place like Pine Island, a place of some wildness, some wilderness, must be more sensitive to the changes, more alert to witness the things that others can't see while hurrying from one macadamized moment to another. We who are the keepers of the menagerie, by living in the wild, have an opportunity to know much more about ourselves.

Not long ago, I saw my father-in-law, Roy, who suffers from Alzheimer's, staring out our window at a creature only he seemed to see. I studied him quietly, observing that his eyes were fixed on a snaky bit of loose vine growing around a confederate jasmine.

He stood, still as stone, staring.

And it seemed his very life rested on what he saw.

Outside, in the sunny air, the green vine wagged harmlessly in the wind.

I asked—innocently, I thought—"Would you like to go outside and see it clearly?"

He nodded. We went out the back door. Soon we were close enough to touch the vine. I reached out for it. Roy grabbed my wrist. "Don't," he said, "it might bite."

"It's just a plant," I told him.

"It's a poisonous snake," he said.

"Would I touch it if it was a poisonous snake?"

"You like to live dangerously," he responded.

There was nothing to do but snatch the vine and show

him, once and for all, that it was just a green stem with an exfoliate leaf at the end. I did so, but he remained skeptical. At last, he shrugged. Unconvinced, he went back indoors.

An hour later, he had his chair pulled up to another window. Entranced by the elegant wiggling of another vine, he stayed for at least an hour, watching. The slim plant had him mesmerized, as cobra-like, it threaded the air with its triangular-shaped head and tapered stem.

I wondered ... was he afraid of it? Did he think it would come through the window and get him? Did he even know there was a window there? At last, his attention turned to some lint

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on his pants. Flicking the lint away, he looked up, saw me watching him and remarked, “That cockeyed thing you showed me wasn’t any snake. There’s no snake out there.”

I smiled. “So you finally saw that it was just a plant.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed. “It was too skinny to be a snake.”

“Then why don’t you go outside and touch it?”

He looked at me as if I were crazy. “No way,” he answered.

“Why not?”

“It might bite.”

People who come to Florida from other places (most of us do, or have done) live in much the same world as Roy. They fear that which might bite—even if the bite really comes from within. I do not mean that we are subject to hallucinations. Rather, what I am saying is that many of us bring our inner world of constant conflict to bear upon the outer one that surrounds us.

After Hurricane Charley knocked

out everyone's water on Pine Island, no one came to our pond for a bath. I was unable to convince even my closest friends that our pond, dark and dreamy and full of lily pads, has some of the freshest water on Pine Island. I told them there were no 'gators in it; never were, probably never will be, though we are not exactly sure why. I repeated that our pond water has been tested and that it's nearly as clean as bottled water.

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But people see things in the obsidian, wind-whirled currents and morning mists of our pond. Things that threaten. Never charming things. They see their own private menagerie; a place where grim beasts look in and look out at the same time. A neighbor I dearly love and who is a fourth- or fifth-generation Floridian told me one day with a wry smile that our pond was fine as ponds go, but it was no doubt inhabited by the Creature from the Black Lagoon. "I swim in it regularly," I told her. "One day you won't," she said ominously.

I couldn't convince her that I've never been surprised by anything more than a soft-shelled turtle that curiously paddled by. I have seen an eagle bathe in the pond, and I have watched a kingfisher chirr and dive into its dark reflective depths and emerge with a flopping fish. I saw a snake do figure eights across the pond. I could have sworn it was a water moccasin, but on closer inspection it turned out to be a rat snake.

Last night a cold front came to Bokeelia, and a moth fluttered into the house. It was a moth, plain and simple. But not, I assure you, simple and plain. This creature was shaped like a hawk. Well-tapered, aeronautically built, the moth clung to the stucco wall as if its life depended upon it. And I'm sure it did.

I watched, fascinated, as the moth's wings, all beige and soft with moth dust, raised and lowered, keeping the rhythm, I thought, of a beating heart. Out of the way of the wind, the insect was safe. I studied its pulsations and realized they were not unlike the glittery glowing emanations of the stars.

The moth was under an alcove. I got as close to it as I could. It was a thing of beauty, not unlike a man or woman in its intensity of being, its lust for life. Its life force, I sensed, was exactly the same as mine. It and I were of the same simple, sacred, dusted cloth.

We each wanted nothing more than to live out the night—me with a fire in the fireplace; the moth with its tight cornered alcove out of the wind. The poet was right: we do live in a menagerie of sorts. And the animals that inhabit it are with us all the time, both day and night. We carry them about like an overloaded ark.

I once wrote in an essay, "The wolf is fearful to us because we are afraid of the wolf in us." Edward Hoagland, speaking of the loss of wild America, put it this way—he called it "the war of the woods," saying that "the animals we do know something about are manufactured as commodities: our million steers like cardboard cutouts and our frenetic force-fed hens. Most of the dogs in the pet shops come out of virtual factories now."

Here in Florida, we can still find wild creatures, and we should welcome that untamed nature rather than fear it. I say, let the menagerie go. Let the wilderness in, but let it out, too. Above all, let us be one with all of it. ♣

Pine Island Soundings won a first-place award for Best Column from the Florida Magazine Association last year.