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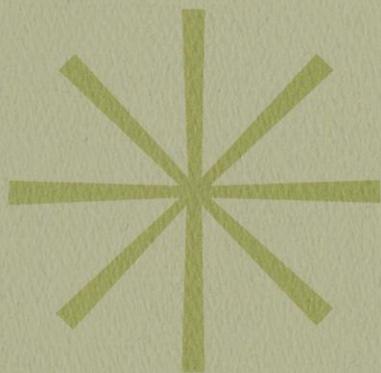
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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



*The Only Everglades
in the World*

POEMS BY ROBIN CHAPMAN

ROBIN CHAPMAN is the author of four previous poetry collections, *Distance, Rate, Time, Learning to Talk*, and the poetry CD *Banff Dreaming*, from Fireweed Press; and *The Way In* from Tebot Bach Press, which won the Council of Wisconsin Writer's 1999 Posner Book-Length Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry, The Hudson Review, The American Scholar, The Southern Review*, and *The Iowa Review*, among many other literary journals. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with her husband Will Zarwell.

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The Only Everglades in the World



*Poems by
Robin Chapman*

PARALLEL PRESS · 2001

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The chapbook's title comes from Marjory Stoneman Douglas's book,
Everglades: River of Grass: "There are no other Everglades in the world."

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for Will

The Everglades of the Northern Imagination

The Everglades of the north, I learn
from well-wishing friends, stink
of brackish mud under a heatstroke
sun—a crack-glazed skin and eyes
attached to jaws that will swallow you
whole in quicksand, tear you limb
from disappearing limb down reptilian
throat. The Everglades of the north
are the black ripple-strike of the water
moccasin's poisonous bite as you tread
on mangrove roots, the gold slink
of a Florida panther in the poisonwood tree.
Trail a languid hand in the water
and you'll twirl like the pelican caught
by its foot, swimming a lopsided circle
around the hammerhead shark,
vanish into that hungry vortex too.
Land's no better, that foot of elevation
to hacksaw hummocks and fire-ant stings,
malarial mosquito mists, the swarming nests
of killer bees. Even the Florida highway
my Wisconsin friends describe is a foreign
tongue, rental cars hijacked by machete,
drug lords blowing up boats under bridges,
busted locals filling the jails, alligators
draped like car tracks across the road. Good,
they say, to feel what it's like to be prey
occasionally, waving me off on my winter
vacation, cheered by the safety of what
they know—another blizzard, ten below.

Angie's Cafe

The southern Florida of pink cinder block
and ceiling fan, bacon, hash browns, eggs
over easy, simmers under the yolk of the sun,
clouds piled like powder biscuits. Here
on the stripmalled road past Homestead Air Base
we stop, on our way to kayak the Everglades,
long past the palace of lights last night,
AutoNation's bright metallic bodies
parked in angled rows under the royal palms.

We're having a last civilized breakfast at Angie's,
biscuits and grits, while the macaws squawk
in the palmettos and hibiscus struggle for footing
along the pesticide-drenched tomato fields.
And the Air Force recruits, in camouflage fatigues,
joke and pass syrup, cream cups, and salt,
as though theirs were just civilian jobs,
commuting to war an old story.
From Florida Bay on out it will be jerky
and crackers, string cheese and nuts, tin cans
of mixed fruit, a ration of water.

The Everglades That I Follow You Into

Only the kayak's skin
of nylon and rubber
between us and salt water,
alligators,
as we begin, tandem,
that circling push and pull—
float a paddle edge
into the wind,
pull it back
through the salt water
as the other edge cuts air.

I follow your rhythm,
a two-step dance
shifting to syncopated waltz
of a four-legged water spider;
we skitter over the gathering waves
as the Florida Bay
heaves beneath us,
tide running out to the Gulf
and we with it,
paddling into the sunset,

into the orange glow
of horizon, the shifting cerulean,
aquamarine. Deepening blue
darkens to night. Our paddles
trail phosphorescence now.
You aim us steadily on toward
Saturn, Venus, Jupiter—
a long vertical line
of guides to Cape Sable

that set, hour by hour,
at the watery place
where stars wink out,
while Orion chases the Bull
across our left shoulders
and the Dog Star follows on behind—
our eyes gather starlight now,
the darker dark that is the hump
of a Florida key, the nearer humps
of mangrove bay,
the whole wide sky,
the Milky Way.

You say that in this stretch
of sky and water, paddlers
sometimes lose their way,
their sense of up and down
shifting in the blackness
of the wavering horizon.
I listen hard to the sounds—
that splash that could be
eagle ray, thump
of a hammerhead or manatee,
the scrape of alligator,
scratch of sandbar—
we run aground,
back off, trying to read
the shapes in the shifting black of wave.

And then the sound of breaking surf
pounding onto sand, the sight—
pale starlit white—of coral beach,
ghostly shape of a boat farther down
the steep slope of East Cape Sable
where water churns and grinds,
the brief steadying of our kayak
broadside to wave, the quick pulling out,

jointly cast onto shore, legs wobbling
through mosquito mist to pitch
the tent, walk down the beach,
raccoons trailing us, to peel and eat
oranges pulled from the sun.
How far we've come in the dark,
following our stars!

Easy Days

We kayak the coast, Cape Sable to our right,
our left horizon dropping off to New Orleans;
make our way, three miles an hour, past a shore
of battered shells—pear whelk, lightning whelk,
scallop and conch, corals flaked to white dust—
remembering the lessons on fractal shorelines,
how the closer you look the longer they stretch,
all those zigzags to take into account—two easy days
to Middle Cape, Northpoint, while underneath us

the spotted sea trout, sawnosed sharks,
go on with their fishy lives; AVISO, we see later,
mercury levels too high to eat more than once a week.
A dolphin arches past, a few egrets fish,
the sandpipers track the foam at low tide.
We beach our boat and tie our tent to driftwood,
clumps of grass, bypass the shade of the poisonwood
for a tarp propped up with the paddle, its cool square
a sunclock telling the hours we fill in beachcombing,
righting a horseshoe crab toppled on her back;
she begins again to dig herself into the sand,
lay her eggs before the next tide turns her upside down,
before scavenger raccoons come to her side at dusk.

Clouds scud over and wind scuffles the water,
crosshatches the wrinkled waves. Bathing
is a brief baptism among the skates and rays.
At sunset, salt towed off, we give our bodies
to the contours we've dug in the sand, hunt down
the tent's mosquitoes, sleep with our gallons of water
zipped away from the masked prowlers
who check the gear, the boat, the plastic pails
of food—we'll see their skinny forms
loping away at dawn. Wake in the night
to each other, bitten, welted, tender to the touch,
and the waning moon, rising late to wander
the shifting peaks and troughs.

The Everglades of the Army Corps of Drainage Engineers

Where are the alligators? There is only
one log, that drifts against the current,
climbs out onto mangrove muck, while we
watch from the chickee, a platform eight feet
by twelve, built of slatted boards, a roof,
small there in the middle of water, our boat
bumping against the boards, the razor edges
of intertidal oysters too polluted to eat now.
Somewhere a million alligators crowd—
muddy channels next to parking lots,
golf course greens where golfers
toss marshmallows to them in the rough.

And where are the birds? Two egrets
in the prop roots, a few cormorants in ragged lines
at dusk. Where are the hundreds of wood storks,
the roseate spoonbills, the frigate bird? Where
is the river of sawgrass? Where are the flocks that arrive
for hours, that darken the sky when they depart?
Vanished with sweet water soaking the sugar crops,
Vanished with sweet water pouring from city taps,
Vanished with sweet water channeled to salt.

Willingly

Willingly we lay ourselves down
in the tent tied down to the boards
of the camping platform hung over the water,
the water that stretched on every side
to horizons of mangrove swamp,
willingly we lay down in the wind
that swept through the mesh
on the thin mats of foam
that cushioned our hips,
under the eiderdown, and your hand
touched my breast; willingly,
under the stars, our hands
drifted and stroked and stayed;
a sweet wet river rose in me and joined
the sweet salt surge of you
that carried us away.

At Night in the Everglades

What pulled us out of the tent past midnight?
Perhaps the moon's absence called us out,
or the sky itself, empty of city light and full
of stars—as, camped on the chickee
with water surrounding us
on every side, we woke
to find the bay entirely still,
a glass, reflecting underfoot
even the littlest stars
of the clear sky overhead, so that we stood
in a world made entirely of stars
wheeling under our feet and above our heads,
naked, in the original world; only a dolphin's fin
traced a wavy line across the Milky Way.

The Dolphin's Smile

The wind swings around to follow us east
through Oyster Bay, where waves steepen
and carry us through the longest day—
fifteen miles to go before the last campsite;
and we, who've marveled at our good fortune,
fair weather, wind at our backs, the map, learn
the challenge of distance, endurance, the long haul—
how, in the open, crossing the bay,
the five dolphins jump out of the water
over each other, clicking and splashing in play;
how, from that long stretch away they spot us
and come, five leaping shapes, toward us, sweep past
our side with sideways eyes, smile, blow water and air
in a burst and are gone—how all our effort falls away.

Later we read of the dozens of dolphins beached
and dying on the eastern coast for reasons we don't
yet know—the toxic algae blooms of our sewage
plants, the noise of our undersea sonic booms
mapping the ocean floor? And the shrimp at the thermal
deep sea vents, blinded by light we've shown on them—
as, among the mangrove islands, the manatee, slow-moving,
floating below the surface, can be paddled over, a bumping
along the kayak shell or a churned red bloom
in the power boat's wake, echoes and ripples of our speed.

What We Carried

Canned mandarin oranges embalmed in Lite syrup with a pulltab lid, a compass strapped to the kayak deck, a map showing water depth and mangrove passageways, folded into a plastic ziplock bag tethered to the hull. Ten gallons of water in jugs under our feet. Peppermint tea. Five coils of rope in serpent-striped dayglow colors, a knowledge of knots, a Swiss army knife, tent, fly, sleeping bag, mats, shade tarp to substitute for trees, extra paddle strapped to the back, a small dried starfish taped to its blade. A Florida fieldguide telling the difference between alligators and crocodiles. *Heart Songs*, stories by Annie Proulx. A pocket notebook and pen. Rain gear and sun gear, mosquito headnet, life jackets, repellent, beer, binoculars, a change of clothes. Two plastic pails packed with granola, ten oranges, ten lunches of peanut butter, a squeeze-bottle of Concord grape jelly, sausage, gorp, crackers, and string cheese; ten dried dinners of stroganoff, spaghetti, beans and rice; campstove, gas, sunshower, toilet paper, a weather radio, a watch that measured altitude and barometric pressure, two pairs of socks, sandals, long-sleeved shirts—all tucked into the boat, battened down into its belly, lodged in its airplane aluminum skeleton between its plastic ribs, in among the sponge and bailer, first aid kit, ropes to work the rudder. And things we almost forgot—ibuprofen. A string for the glasses. Garden gloves. Irish tin whistle, can opener, butane lighter. Keys for the car. And nothing blew away or sank through the cracks though we began to count how much of what the two of us had brought or found was one of a kind; necessary to comfort, navigation; essential to life itself.

The Everglades of Ash

As we leave, Alligator Alley, Interstate 75, shuts down
in the smoke of wildfires burning sawgrass and brush—
drought and the draw-down of water turning the river
to ash. *Arson*, the headlines say. All those dark acres
lit up under the belly of our jet banking north from Miami;
a distant spill of crawling firefall on either side of asphalt.
Much too far away to hear the spit and hiss, the rush
of what goes up in smoke—somewhere in that southern dark,
two nights ago, we lay on a platform holding each other
and heard the night wind carry the sound of snapping twigs
or clicking shells that we learned were the mating calls
of cricket frogs, an urgent music filling the dark.



THE ONLY EVERGLADES IN THE WORLD

by Robin Chapman

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