

Naturally Twisted Too

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Front cover photo:
My dog Darwin, proving he can track deer

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Dedication: To every person who sees Wilderness Florida through gentle, loving eyes and who share that affection with others.

FOREWORD

Mark has an exceptional eye to recognize and capture intriguing wildlife antics that sometimes border on fantasy: A brown thrasher taking a sand bath, a young wood stork learning to fly and a butterfly seemingly chasing its own shadow. Mark likes to surprise and confuse us by framing a boat's wake that looks more like a waterfall, or by focusing on a piece of floating driftwood that might be mistaken for an alligator's eye poking up through the water.

He also includes very different and engaging kinds of prose with each image. Sometimes he just describes curious wildlife behavior. Or he uses rhymes and even doggerel. An example of whimsy is a bedraggled giant swallowtail in flight with the message to fly on, regardless of your physical limitations. His image of a horse-riding cowboy with a cell phone pressed to his ear might suggest the rider suffers from “impending nature-deficit disorder.” But Mark sees the humorous side. His caption is, “Why cowboy accidents are on the rise.”

A recurring theme with his landscapes, especially of rivers and trees, is to encourage us to enjoy, be inspired by, and respect nature. In these things, Mark excels.

--Thomas L. Poulson, Naturalist, Emeritus Professor of Ecology and Evolution, and a friend to www.LoxahatcheeFriends.com.

Naturally Twisted Too



Darwin and Mark Renz

Introduction

Realism is often over-rated. Or perhaps it's just that fantasies can be under-rated. I embrace both in my world and find they each enrich me. I accept reality - or to be more precise - truth, for what it can do to help me understand and cope with the real world. Fantasies give me a chance to turn reality on its head and in doing so, the hard knocks of life also become more tolerable, even thought-provoking and often downright funny.

The reality that fascinates me most, borders on fantasy. When I see a giant swallowtail butterfly appear to chase its shadow, I do a double-take. Or when I notice a fluffy white thistle seed that normally separates itself from its parent plant and then journeys by air – instead take to a creek and travel by floating on the water's surface – I am blown away (how thistle of me) by its alternate means of travel.

I love to watch the animated way in which birds bathe or learn to fly, how water reflections take on Monet-like qualities and how driftwood markings or shapes naturally resemble ghost-like figures of Native Americans or alligators. I am intrigued by how prehistoric sharks teeth were not only functional in the shark's jaw eons ago, but are so artistic today and can tell ancient stories of an

evolving planet. I am puzzled when I see cows giving trees manicures, encouraged when determined plants grow out of cracks in walls, and aware of how much things have changed in a few short decades when I see a cowboy riding his horse with a cell phone pressed to his ear.

I get great satisfaction from tweaking such photos and playing with their colors, lighting, textures or composition. Perhaps I over-saturate or turn the reflected waterscape upside down, or clone an extra eye onto the driftwood face, or purposefully shoot an alligator's face out of focus to fit my caption about lost glasses, or blur a swimming sea turtle to give it motion.

I am primarily interested in second and third dimensions of my subjects, not just the ones I know to be true. Of course, science is still important to me and I include it where it fits. But like my companion book, "Naturally Twisted: A Wild Look At The Wild," there is so much more to life than reality.

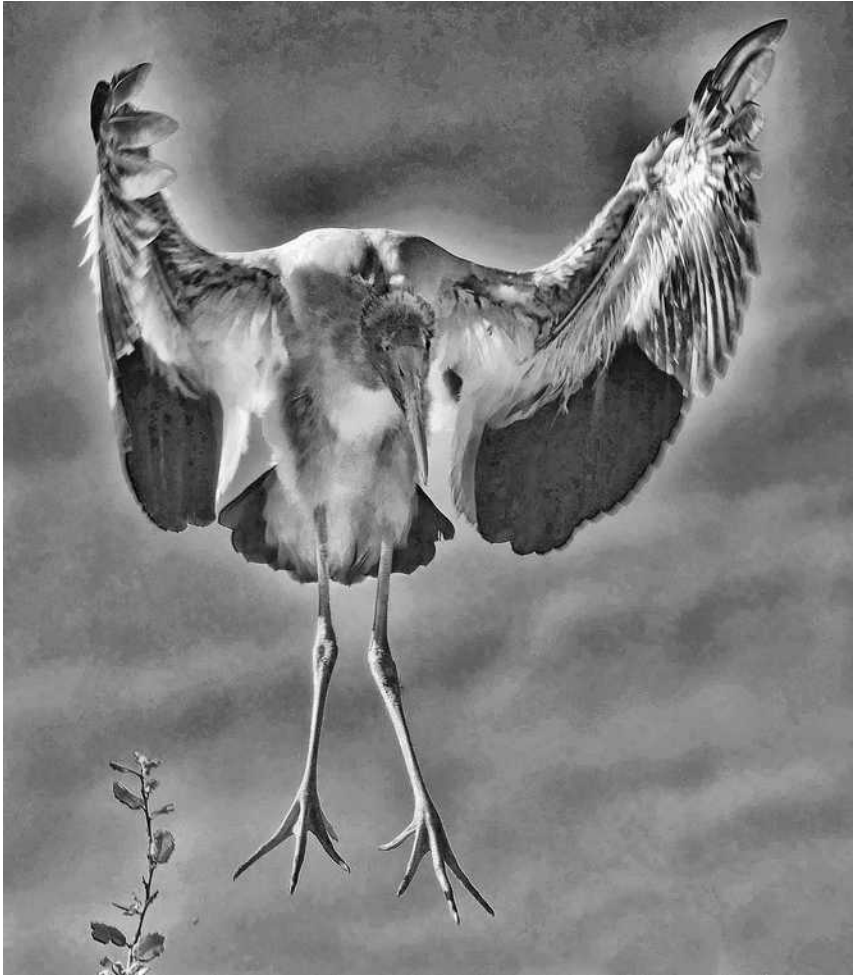
So here's a toast to the real world. And here's a second toast for all those other wonderful places we sometimes find ourselves.



A hot, dreary, muggy morning for a first attempt at flight. A lesser bird would give up and wait for a cooler day with a light breeze.

But if we all waited for everything to be just right, we would never fly beyond our dreams.

Young Woodstork (*Mycteria americana*).
The Alligator Farm, St. Augustine, FL.



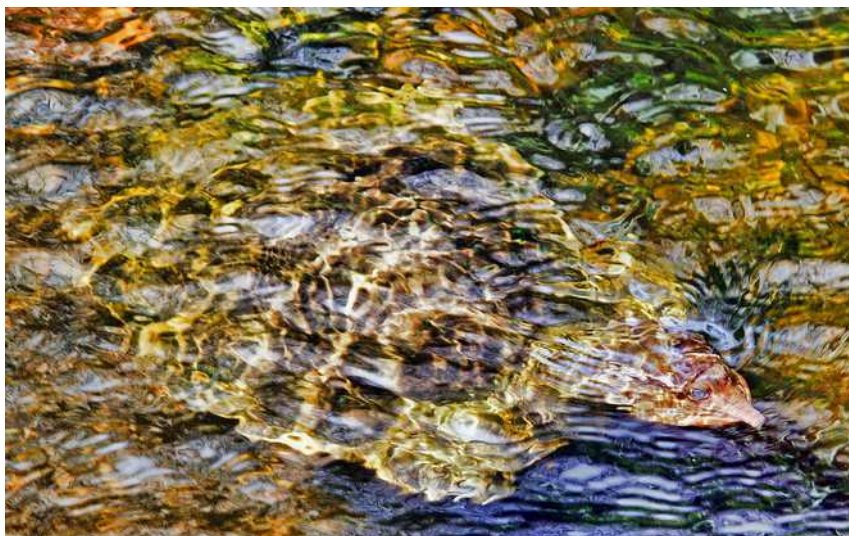
Lift off! Dream accomplished! Young Woodstork (*Mycteria americana*), manages to Hoover just above its nest, before settling back down and high-fiving some other storks.

The Alligator Farm, St. Augustine, FL.



When I think about investing in a bank for the long term, it's a river bank that comes to mind. Why? Because the dividends pay off for all of Earth, not just my fellow humans.

Estero River, Estero, FL.



A friend asked me if the act of snapping a photo distracted me from the complete appreciation of the moment. I suppose so, I replied. But even without my camera, I often see only a fraction of a given moment and miss the rest. Once I snap the picture, I get to return to that moment to see if I missed anything. If it's a beautiful scene, I get to revisit in again and again. Here, I thought I could make out a softshell turtle (*Apalone ferox*), with my naked eye, but until I pointed my zoom lens in that direction, I wasn't sure. I'm not alone. I suspect herons and raccoons would have a tough time seeing the turtle as well.

Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



My dog Darwin isn't afraid of any ol' cow. Of course, the cow isn't afraid of any ol' cattle dog either. Arcadia, FL.



Darwin is also great at tracking deer, even the more unusual concrete species. Alva, FL.



Christmas in the summer. Ft. Denaud Cracker house, near LaBelle, FL. According to the University of Florida, IFAS Extension, the poinsettia (*Poinsettia cyathophora*) is native to Mexico. What most people think of as the red flowers are a cluster of modified leaves called bracts. The true flowers are yellow-green, small and clustered in the centers of the bracts.



I'd rather be a tiny droplet of water
than a large flowing river
A soft-spreading ripple
than a massive tidal wave
A gentle touch
than a mighty hand
A reflection of grace and dignity
than mean-spirited prejudice
I'd rather reach someone's heart
with a kind, encouraging word
than a loud, angry voice.

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), Nocatee, FL.



Shhhh...Been up all night. Hungry chick nearby.
Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). Brownville, FL.



Sleep? This isn't a time for sleep. Feed me!



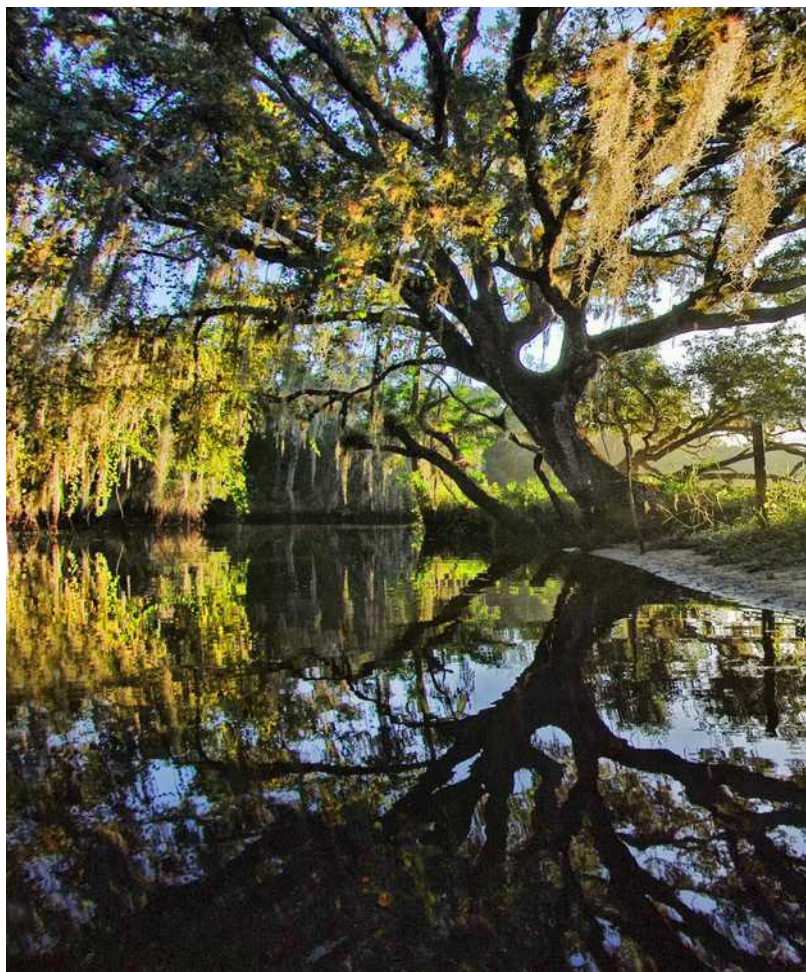
If you want to know where Ponce de Leon's City of Gold is really located, you just need to read the map on the wings of a White Peacock butterfly (*Anartia jatrophae*). As kids, we thought the wings resembled an old parched pirate's map. Arcadia, FL.



Wind Master. Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*). Raptor (bird of prey). Arcadia, FL. Spends fall and winter in South America, then arrives in Florida in early March to breed.



How long does it take for a wilderness stream to mix its many colors and paint such a soft sweet scene? How inspired does it have to be to splash green palmetto shrubs, yellow-brown hickory branches and summer blue skies across a flowing canvas?
Arcadia, FL.



If you press your ear
to an old tree
you'll hear the stories
passed on through root and bark
and branch and leaf
and the shade
that comforts you now.

Telegraph Creek, near Alva, FL.



Sunny my Son with a golden circle on your chest
You are different than the rest
Are you maturing just in time to make the 700 mile journey
to a northern climate with different foods and challenges
Will you lock into the stars at night for guidance
like your Indigo cousins
How will you make it over large cities
like Orlando and Jacksonville
How will you keep tabs with your flight mates
your parents and siblings
and that romance you started with Lucy

Is she really the love of your life
Is she really ahead of you by a few weeks
building a nest that the two of you
will soon call your own
Or did she reject you over your unusual sun spot?
How many dogs and cats and snakes
and owls and hawks will you encounter
or any bird larger than yourself
How do you stay so positive
so focused
I could learn so much from you
if I had wings
if I could sing in tune
if I really knew where I was going
Teach me
Teach me before you leave
Show me the way home before I'm too old
to learn a thing or two about life
And one last thing
How do you deal with TSA
Are the lines long
I'm just asking
Oh, and have a safe flight

Male Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*), due to head north around
April 20...back to northern Florida or up into the Carolinas. Then
returns to Florida in October.



Wilderness standout. Female Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*). Male often builds several incomplete, unused nests in his territory; the female builds the real nest.
Peace River at Zolfo Springs, FL.



Lover's Crane. Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). Arcadia, FL.



Few birds remind me of my youth
more than the limpkin
When I hear it's mournful cry
along a river's edge in the middle of the night
or early in the morning
It does anything but make me sad
Some folks complain
that it carries on too long at night
making it difficult for them to get any sleep
My respectful response is that maybe
they should find another place to live
For this is an ancient sound
a calming sound
It's not a sound for everybody
but most surely a sound
that everybody would do well to appreciate
For it represents a Florida
that thrived long before our kind
began to tame the Wild

Limpkin (*Aramus guarauna*), Alva, FL.

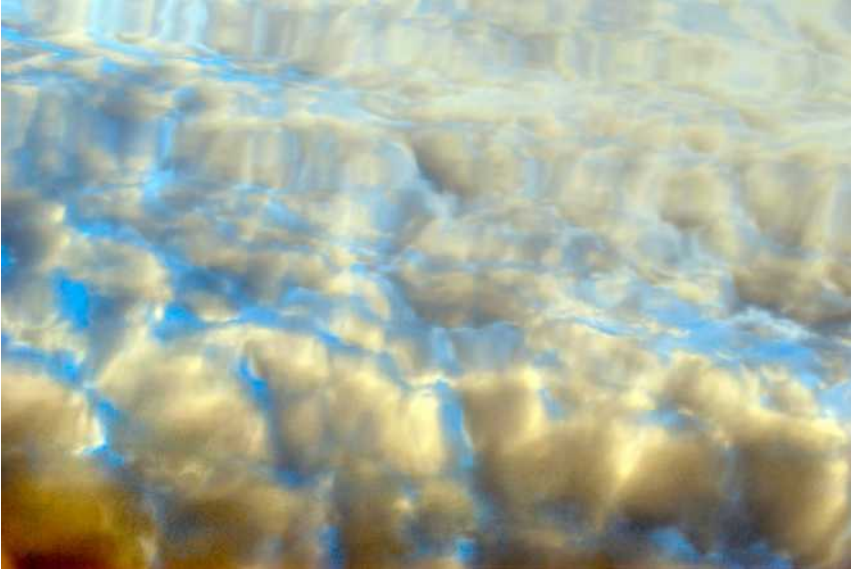


When an old dreamer
looks back
he scarcely notices
the sunken rotten timbers
of the vessel that carried him
across the Seven Seas
Instead, he remembers
the hard-headed lad
with more drive than brains
Who hadn't a clue
where his ship was headed
only that he was
in charge of the rudder
And he can't help but grin
because he knows that somehow
he got to all those places
in his dreams
and some places that weren't
in his dreams
And he made it back home
just as that old vessel
was taking on water

But don't look at him with pity
for behind the old dreamer's eyes
there are new dreams stirring
With more vessels to build
and more seas to sail



Alligator Tick (Giant Water Bug or Belostomatidae). According to Wikipedia: Belostomatidae are fierce predators which stalk, capture and feed on aquatic crustaceans, fish and amphibians. They have also been found to capture and feed on baby turtles and water snakes. They often lie motionless at the bottom of a body of water, attached to various objects, where they wait for prey to come near. They then strike, injecting a powerful digestive saliva with their rostrum, and sucking out the liquefied remains. Their bite is considered one of the most painful that can be inflicted by any insect. Arcadia, FL.



Ask a cloud about its plans
and it will tell you
it has no plans but to heed the wind
which has no plans but to respond to the sun
What about the river
It has no plans but to listen to gravity
then flow toward the sea
What about me
My plans are simple
To sit at the edge of a river
and ask a cloud about its plans
Caloosahatchee River, Alva, FL.



You think I don't see you watching me
Whispering softly to your friends
There's another one of those odd-looking
two-legged bi-pedal uprighters with no wings
Wow, they're goofy-looking and noisy and destructive
Wonder what's happening in that big head of his
I wonder where he's been and where he's going
And why he stopped here to watch me watch him

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*), Arcadia, FL.

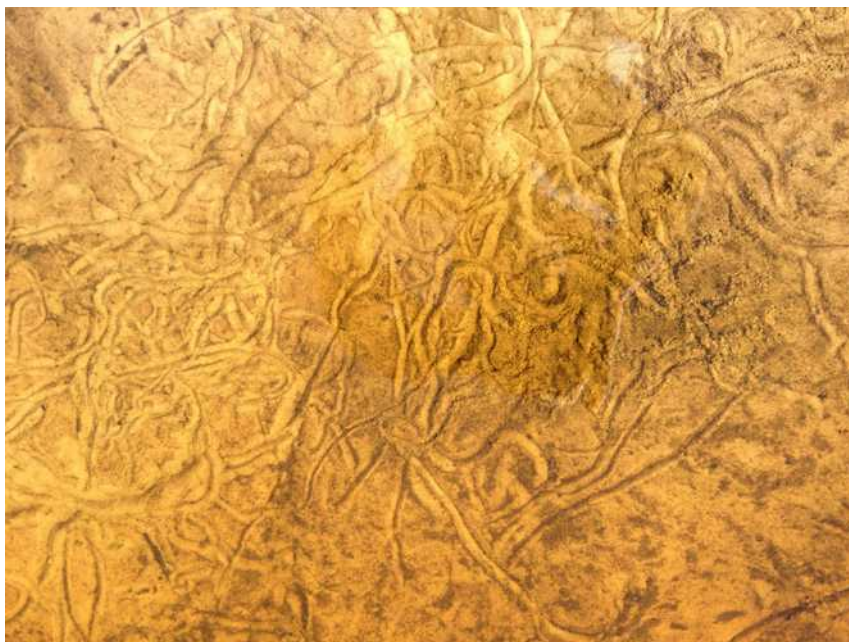


I can think of no hotter flames
than those sparked by desire
How much of that desire
do we wear on our faces
in our eyes
and in our movements
For just the right person
in just the right place

at just the right time
Oh love
you crazy
confusing
fantastic feeling
How could anyone ever doubt
your existence and power
Thank you from the bottom
of our hearts
And if you don't mind
could you lower the blinds
We'd like a little privacy now

Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*). Electric blue eye ring only while courting (plumage does not change and is not different during courtship). Bright colors of soft parts and bills are kept only during courtship but aigrette display feathers of herons and egrets are held until the next molt.

Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL



If we were to trace our paths while pursuing love, career and fame would this resemble the system of trails we leave behind? In spite of the winding and twisting right turns and wrong turns, the path could be considered a real work of art -- depending, of course, on the opinion of the art critic.

These trails were left by mussels on a shallow creek bottom in Arcadia, FL. Mussels move along the bottom like an inch worm. To pull themselves forward, they use their "foot," which is a long, muscular body part. They can also use their foot to burrow under the sand. Florida is home to both native and exotic mussels.



Ever wonder if the Polyphemus moth's "eyes" on its lower wings look enough like owl eyes to ward off many predators? Surely it must help (unless another owl sees them in a romantic way). Plus, the soft feathery texture on their wings are scales made from modified hairs that detach easily, which helps them escape from spider webs. The scales will stick, but not the moth. We all have special adaptations that allow us to survive. But change is inevitable and eventually every life form is forced to keep adapting or become extinct. Including us.

Polyphemus moth (*Antheraea polyphemus*).
Lehigh Acres, FL



If I turn on the evening news
I quickly learn that things
are not right in the world
But when I step outside at twilight
and catch the sweet call note
of a red-winged blackbird
I know it's not such a bad world after-all.

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



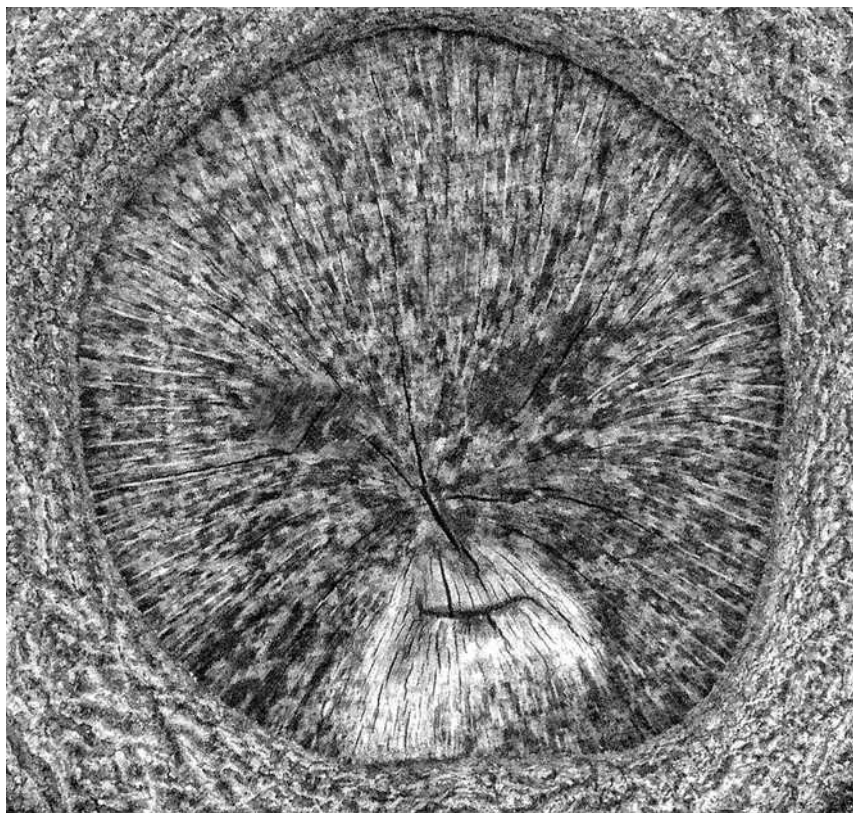
The first thing I notice in this image
is the absence of me
and all my petty wants
If I could just stay away
and view the Wild from a distance
how much more beautiful would it be
How much better would it function
Is it really necessary for me
to physically caress every square inch
To plow paths through every last acre
stalk every creature
shatter all of its silence
Am I not capable of being
more gentle than that
Yes, but I need to remind myself
every now and then

Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest,
between La Belle and Immokalee, FL.



The next time you think about
offering a flower
to your significantly
significant other
Consider instead the gift
of seeing that flower
growing wild and unpicked
Then ask for a dance
And watch as your romance
takes root and grows

Marsh Pink flower (*Sabatia grandiflora*).
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



Okay, I admit it. I'm a tweakographer.

For me, some photographs are flat out boring unless they're saturated, de-colored, cropped, sharpened, masked, high-lighted, layered, filtered, blurred, mirrored or totally recomposed. And I admit why I do each of those dastardly things. Because reality isn't everything.

Life is full of dreamers and those who see the world slightly out of kilter. Don't get me wrong.

Reality has it's place. But it's only one place.

There are many, many others.

And that's where you'll find tweakographers like me.

Burger King parking lot, Wauchula, FL.



When I am moved by certain moments in nature, I look for something to say to others worthy of what I felt. But I usually come away speechless. Muse (near LaBelle), FL.



If I truly want balance, I have to weigh the needs (not wants) of my species against the needs of all life forms – knowing that one affects the other and together, they affect the whole.
Babcock Ranch Preserve, Charlotte and Lee county, FL.



Snail Hunter. Everglades Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*).
Lehigh Acres, FL.



I see you see me
Who's to say then
that the real you
is not more me
than I
and less me
than you

Immature Black-Crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*).
Photo flipped intentionally. Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray
Beach, FL.



If I was suddenly placed in charge
of a little blue planet
somewhere in a vast galaxy
known as the Milky Way
I would ask why
Why place me or my kind
in charge of such a precious planet
Why not live as if everyone matters
as if all things matter
As if nothing matters more
than trying our best to get along

Marble found in LaBelle, FL.



New research suggests female Burrowing Owls rely on road signs to find their way around their neighborhood. Males, however, continue to just wing it and are known to get totally lost while only blocks from their home. Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*). Cape Coral, FL.



There are rare moments when I can still see
and smell and taste you
as you must have flowed for thousands of years
You were and always will be my first love
I realize during those fleeting moments
why so many have fallen for your graceful streaming curves
and moist, succulent airplants
Yet, I will never understand why we could not appreciate you
as you were
why we felt the need to conquer you
to transform you from all-giving lover
to wretched and unrecognizable beast
confused and left for dead
This may be who we are
but it is not who we are capable of being
Forgive us
Forgive me

Caloosahatchee River oxbow in Alva, FL.



That look your parents gave you when you were young and about to do something really dumb. The same look you later realized you inherited. Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*).
Cape Coral, FL.



Swamp Queen.
Queen Butterfly (*Danaus gilippus*).
Telegraph Cypress Swamp, Babcock Ranch Preserve, FL.



When stars diversify they first cool
then take on constantly changing particles of energy
Some of these particles coalesce
and become planets
and moons
and asteroids
and comets.

Some become molecules and cells of living
breathing creatures that are supported by
and contribute to evolving ecosystems
Some particles lie on the ocean floor
long after they served a living purpose
and eventually are recognized
by a curious wide-eyed life form
anxious to understand origins and purpose
Then they hold the particles up to the light
of the nearest star and somehow see themselves
as they once were
as they are now
and as they will someday be.

Megalodon shark (*Carcharocles megalodon*), 10 million years
old. From the private collection of Dr. Gordon Hubbell.



Sometimes the world is a better place
when we offer our opinion where no one can hear it.

American Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*).

Homossassa Springs State Park, FL.

Unusual for flamingo to have its head under water. Normally, it feeds with its head upside down and the bill filtering the water's surface. According to Audubon: Until about 1900, flocks of flamingos from the Bahamas regularly migrated to Florida Bay, in what is now Everglades National Park. Today, most flamingos

seen on the loose in North America are considered suspect, as possible escapees from aviaries or zoos. However, some of those appearing in Florida Bay may still be wanderers from Bahamian colonies, and some seen in coastal Texas may come from colonies on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.



When I was a silly young lad
I wondered why people trimmed
the underside of their trees
Isn't that being just a little too tidy
Then one day I saw a cow
neatly trimming the underside
of a laurel oak tree
It was a turning point for me
in maturing
I now understood why people kept cows
But I still didn't understand why cows
felt the need to be so tidy

Arcadia, FL.



Victor likes pretty flowers
not stinky road-kill
no matter how unfreshly presented
But as a hopeless romantic
he often woos the other vultures
by singing such classic buzzard songs
as "Love is a many splattered thing"
It's no wonder he is irresistible
in vulture circles
. Yet his greatest challenge is to find flowers
that have been run over by a car

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*).
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



With the cow in the mood, the cranes crooned.
(Okay, I got some help on this caption but can't remember who to thank.). Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). Alva, FL.



If a plant can grow through a crack in a wall,
surely I can grow through hard times. Moore Haven, FL.



Some mornings I feel guilty getting out of bed, knowing how beautiful and sunny SW Florida is going to be. On days like this, I have to keep the blinds drawn so I'm not tempted to rush out the door before eating or getting a shower. It's a tough place to live, but somebody's got to do it.



There is something about a parent tenderly feeding
its young that is beautiful, natural, noble and graceful.
And sometimes a little scary.

Parent getting ready to regurgitate a ball of food (Bolus).
Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*).
Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



Sometimes it appears as if butterflies chase their own shadows –
which seem to know where they're going,
even if the butterfly doesn't.

Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*). Nocatee, FL.



With no brain and no parent to guide it
this thistle seed has adapted to water
and is using it to travel a few hundred feet
Or perhaps miles
as it searches for a place to take root
and start a life away from its family plant
Surface tension at the tip of each arm
allows it to float, pushed lightly by wind
but mainly by the creek's currents
I stood neck deep so I could watch it sail by
at eye level and swear it blew me a kiss
before disappearing around the bend

Hawthorne Creek, Nocatee, FL.



Sandy songster. Who says you have to get wet to take a bath? Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*). A lot of birds bathe in the sand, perhaps to clean their feathers or remove parasites, or simply because it's fun and feels good.

The brown thrasher is an omnivore and a bird in the family Mimidae, which includes mockingbirds. It has over 1,000 songs in its repertoire, more than any other bird.

Lehigh Acres, FL.



I think I know what this little marsh mallow is thinking:
“If I had a nose as funny-looking as that human's,
I would pay someone to have it stretched.”

Roseate Spoonbill chick (*Platalea ajaja*).
Alligator Farm, St. Augustine, FL.



Green has its challenges. And for the Carolina Anole (*Anolis carolinensis*), it's being challenged by an introduced and invasive Brown Anole (*Anolis sagrei*). The more aggressive brown anole chases the native green anole (which can change color to brown), up into bushes and part way up trees.

The huge knight anole is in tree tops.

Arcadia, FL.



No one believes me when I tell them
about Florida waterfalls
They think I've been in the lowlands too long
Drinking the swampwater
and smoking freshly cut cabbage palms
But when unsuspecting guests
join me by kayak or small boat
they soon realize
Florida really does have waterfalls
as magnificent as any anywhere
I happened to catch this one
with my camera
just as a small boat passed us
going the opposite direction
and it's gentle two-foot-high waves
poured clouds down onto
the Caloosahatchee River
Waterfalls indeed



Poor thing. No feathers. Can't fly. No long bill.
Can't peck. Squawks constantly. Never seems content.
I don't know how they survive. I sure am glad I won't grow
into one of those pitiful adult humans.

Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*), colt and parent.
Arcadia, FL.



Clouds wearing too much lipstick
Sky feeling a little blue
Trees reaching out for a glimmer of hope
from a twilight passing through

Wauchula, FL.



Ever notice when you're afraid of something, everything becomes that something? Take alligators...I've got friends who swear they're coming out of the woodwork. Peace River, Arcadia, FL.



Anybody seen my glasses?



Never mind, I found them.



Dangerous Trust? Already trusting, Florida Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*), may be further threatened by being fed. When my wife Marisa and I drove over to Cape Coral (FL) to see if we could spot and photograph the threatened birds, I told her they are very trusting and will likely allow us to get fairly close for photos. We weren't counting on them landing on us.

While this bird may be trusting by nature, it was obvious to us that they were accustomed to being fed. Such actions may be great for photos but risky for the birds. If they wait for sporadic handouts, squirrels and other critters may deplete their natural food source before they realize it's too late. Not all humans are friendly either. It's a matter of time before a pellet or BB gun is aimed in their direction as an easy target by rambunctious youngsters, or a neighbor who resents the protection of the bird's habitat that he or she feels might be better suited for human habitat.

After about 10 minutes of hamming it up for photos, the friendly jays realized we weren't going to feed them and went off to find acorns.

According to Wikipedia, this bird is one of the species of scrub jay native to North America. It is the only species of bird endemic to the U.S. state of Florida and one of only 15 species endemic to the continental United States. Because of this, it is heavily sought by birders who travel from across the country to observe this unique species. It is known to have been present in Florida as a distinct species for at least 2 million years, and is possibly derived from the ancestors of Woodhouse's scrub jay, the inland forms of the western scrub jay.

Cape Coral, FL.



The sun teaches winds to blow
Rain teaches streams to flow
Soil teaches roots to grow
The moon teaches hearts to glow

Pine Island, FL.



Imagine a place
no one owned
or could build on
or run a pipe through
or fly over
And the only access
was through a lottery
with one winner a year
who could hang out for a day
and watch
and listen
and just be
Or perhaps choose
to stay away
and leave it to be
without any human contact
Imagine such a place
Imagine such a person
Imagine a lot of such places
Imagine a lot of such persons
What are we waiting for



When river oaks date
they like to dress in
absinthe green bromeliad suits
with long gray tillandsia ties
Exposing subtle shades
of gnarly bark
So that when they look
longingly at each other
in the mushy moistness
surrounding their roots
They can flirt
in the privacy of the soil
and grow ever closer
and more attached
along the banks of the river

Caloosahatchee River oxbow, Alva, FL.



Jerry was tired of dressing like every other jay
So he decided to try out the wet look
Which after a lot of shaking of his soaked feathers
lasted about 15 minutes
And very soon he was dry again and dressed like every other jay
But at least he had his 15 minutes of being a little different
than the rest of the jays
What's the moral to this story
If you really want to be different and for that difference to last
taking a bath may not help
Or wearing the hippest clothes
Or getting branded with the latest tattoo
Or driving the sharpest car
But cleansing your heart and being kind to others
will make you a better person than you were 15 minutes ago
And then who cares if that makes you
the same or different than everybody else

Blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), Lehigh Acres, FL.



How does a mother know she's a mum
How does a baby know he's young
How do the stars know how to shine
How does love know when it's time

Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*),
Homosassa Springs State Park, FL.



Trampoline event, White Pelican Olympics.
White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*).
Chokoloskee Island, FL.



It's not my fault, I just couldn't get enough beauty sleep
last night. Immature black-crowned night heron. (*Nycticorax
nycticorax*). Caloosahatchee River oxbow, near Alva, FL.



Reflections allow us to see a softer world
where anything is possible
and everything can be beautiful
Then we walk away
realizing that the softer world
we just peeked into
is our world
where anything is possible
and everything can be beautiful

Fisheating Creek, Palmdale, FL.



Seeking yellow rats. Snake is exhibiting concertina locomotion (similar to opening and closing an accordion). Yellow Rat Snake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*). Nocatee, FL.



Duck that laid the golden sunset.
Mottled duck (*Anas fulvigula*). Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



If I could see eye to eye with every living thing
whether it had fins or wings or arms or tails or shells
or claws or roots...
Would I not do a better job of taming my ego
and leaving the Wild just a little more wild?
Horseshoe Crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) eye. Sanibel, FL.



The Hourling. Near as I can tell, an hour is just about all this young American Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinicus*), has been standing. An open egg shell was just a few feet away. Taken from Wakodahatchee Wetlands boardwalk, Delray Beach, FL.



Big feet to grow into. American Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinicus*). Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



The problem with hugging your first tree is that then they all want a hug. Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), Nocatee, FL.



Show this image to one person and they may tell you it reminds them of no-see-ums, mosquitoes, spiders, alligators, heat and humidity. It's the last place on Earth they would want to visit. Show the same image to someone else and they will tell you this is paradise, then beg you for directions.

Red Mangrove trees (*Rhizophora mangle*) and Leather Fern (*Acrostichum danaeifolium*). Manatee Park, leading out to the Orange River. Fort Myers, FL.



Babcock bobcat (*Lynx rufus*). This sleek and stealthy feline is at home on the Babcock Ranch in Charlotte and Lee county, FL.

Thick pine woodlands with dense saw palmetto shrubs, hammocks and swamps are great places for it to hunt small mammals such as squirrels, rabbits, rats, opossums and raccoons.

Bobcats usually hunt at night but can be seen during the day because they only sleep 2-3 hours at a time. Their range in rural areas is 5 or 6 square miles, but in urban areas where it is equally at home, its range is 1 to 2 miles. Source: Myfwc.com.



There's nothing like space
to give you peace of mind
Space is freedom
Space gives you a sense of openness
to the natural world
Space gives you an opportunity
to be part of something larger
and more complete
while still maintaining your individuality

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).
Babcock Ranch Preserve, FL.



Luna Landing. Was this Luna Moth (*Actias luna*) drawn to the saw palmetto shrub because of the shrub's resemblance to itself or was it just a fluke? Either way, I was drawn to both because of their beauty. Research has shown that the moth's tail flopping during flight confuses echo-locating bats. Arcadia, FL.



The wind never tells me where it's going
and I never ask
It's funny how it always seems to be arriving
and leaving at the same time
As if it's eternal
As if it's fleeting
As if it has some place it would rather be
Or no place it would rather be
It's forever saying hello and goodbye in the same breath
Just like us
Here in my notebook it tries to turn the pages
before my thoughts are complete
Before I can slide my pen across the paper
The wind is always pushing me forwards and pulling me back
Storms have trouble keeping up
They flee from it as if it's a bad thing
as if it's a good thing
as if it's indifferent
to their role in the heavens

Lehigh Acres, FL.



Without love, no one would act the fool.
Without fools, no one would fall in love.

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) in courting colors.
St. Augustine, FL Alligator Farm.



It's strange how a second becomes a minute
an hour becomes a day
and a day becomes another year
While some of us are always looking way ahead
Others constantly over our shoulders
And some of us aren't looking at all
Some of us are falling in love - some are falling out
Some of us are left wondering what love really is
and whether anyone can grasp it for long
Some of us are gone before we see another sunrise or sunset
let alone another year
Some of us have been hugged too much
Others haven't been hugged enough
or kissed or caressed
or made to feel welcome here on Planet Earth
But this second, this every second as you read this line...
Stop and tell someone - a stranger perhaps
that they are special
And that they mean the world to you

Boat-tailed grackles (*Quiscalus major*).
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



When I seek wisdom, these are the elders I sit before.
Somehow cypress trees have managed to live
in relative harmony with their neighboring ferns, mosses,
saw palmettos, bugs, birds, fish, snakes, turtles and alligators.
And it has done so in its current form for at least 300 million
years. There are clear lessons to be learned here about getting
along with others, sharing resources, taking only enough for
immediate needs and burying ego deep below the soil.
Teachers are plentiful and tuition is free.

Big Cypress National Preserve, FL.



Armchair Environmentalist.
Caloosahatchee River, Fort Myers, FL.



The optimist black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*),
circles the moon for road kill, just in case...



Rarely do quiet moments live long in my neighborhood
As soon as they're born they die a quick death
brought on by noisy contraptions
created by bizarre upright creatures who look a lot like me
This morning though it seemed as if quiet
might just have a chance to evolve into genuine silence
It grew so quiet I could actually hear the sounds of Nature
A woodpecker of the pileated sort and its partner, perhaps a parent
were pecking away at loose bark on the branch of an old tree
Tap-tap, tappity-tap followed by a short burst
of laughter Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha
Now this is where some of my friends will say
they are more human than I am
and that I should be fitted for wings and fly off with such birds
Why? Because I count the woodpecker's sounds as silence
Yes, as a human I am part of nature and therefore all my sounds
are natural - or dare I say unnatural
and part of the natural world, right?
Let's argue that point later over a natural light beer

And you treat
So I'm listening to this forever silence in the 10 minutes
I've been standing next to the woods
When all of a sudden my silence is shattered
Rhuummmm!
I turn to see a pick-up truck barrel past the front of my house
towing a trailer
Sssssqqqqueeeeeeaaaakkkk! go the worn-out truck brakes
Momentary silence again as the woodpeckers continue
pecking and peeling back bark
Slam! Slam! Two uprighters exit the truck
Silence again...but this time without the woodpeckers pecking
They have noticed the intrusion and have paused as if to wait
for their form of silence and mine - to return
BAM!! Slams the trailer's ramp against the ground.
Babababa! Rnnnnnn! goes the motor from a riding mower
Yeeeeeeeeeeen! screams a gas-operated weed-eater
designed to trim and warm the Planet
Two men attack the wild grass in another neighbor's lawn
that to me already appears perfectly manicured
and unnaturally natural
I look up to see what the woodpeckers think
and notice they're gone
Perhaps to a quieter location
where they can finish their breakfast in silence
Later, I asked Mr. Manicure if he has noticed any pileated
woodpeckers lounging about in the neighborhood pines
"Damn noisy birds!" he grumbles.
"It would be a lot quieter around here
without them!"

Pleated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*).
Lehigh Acres, FL.



When age overtakes you
and your outward beauty fades

Fly on

When your strength is ebbing
and your mind no longer clear

Fly on

When no one really knows you -
they've never looked inside

Fly on

Introduce yourself
show them who you are

Fly on

Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*), Arcadia, FL.



When you're away from home, over-extended and not sure where your next meal's coming from, it's time for a teary-eyed skype call home to mom or dad.

Immature Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*).

Arcadia, FL.



If we could learn to live as simply as a wetlands community
our needs would be basic and our wants minimal
There would be no need for greed or ego or prejudice
or generals or wars or pollution or superstition
Ah, but there I go again living dangerously
Daydreaming while behind the wheel until a honking horn
behind me announces the light has changed
So I must move on and join the ranks of my kind
Who are stressed, angry, unfulfilled and directionless
This is the curse of a higher intelligence
Arrogant and confident that the more things we have
and the more complex our lives
the happier we'll be
And that some higher power believes our actions are justified
and will eventually save us from ourselves
If we could only learn to live as simply as a wetlands community

Plants: floating hearts (*Nymphoides aquatica*).
Babcock Ranch Preserve, FL.



For 400 million years
lichens have remained unchanged
Except for every now and then
when they get the urge to fly
And some of them break ranks
to move beyond what is expected
to what is dreamed
Then before long
fungi and algae move
from mutualistic symbiosis
to feathered partners
ready to sail to the heavens
then return to add more color
and more life
to old growth forests

Black-throated Blue Warbler (*Setophaga caerulescens*).
on an oak. Arcadia, FL.



Cow pasture sweethearts.
Northern Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*).
Hwy. 31, between Arcadia and Fort Myers, FL.



I know there can be a distance between my world and the Wild. Most of the time it seems like a million miles as I live out my human life, hurrying around too much to notice or consider other life forms. But occasionally, I turn outward and observe or breathe as if I am not just human. We, me, they, become as one.

During those times, it's "our" world and no one tries to hoard or change it. How wild is that?

Red-bellied Woodpecker (*Melanerpes carolinus*).
Ft. Denaud cemetery, near LaBelle, FL.



(Photo 1 of 3): A flustered young Red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*). Why? See next two images. Eye color is because of nictitating membrane, or third eye lid that helps protect its eyes when needed. Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



(Photo 2 of 3): The look of a calm White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*).
Why calm? See final photo on next page. Harns Marsh, Lehigh
Acres, FL.



(Photo 3 of 3): Here's why the hawk is flustered and the ibis is calm. The hawk thinks the ibis is a meal but the ibis doesn't know that – or care. Eventually, the same hawk flew off in search of an easier meal. Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



Crane Crossing.
Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*), Arcadia, FL.



When I think of other dimensions
I don't imagine them as places I go
but rather places that come to me
when I'm still and at peace
with who I am.
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



Why cowboy accidents are on the rise. SW FL.



Whenever these two show-offs get together
they somehow always get into mischief.

Male Indigo Bunting upper photo in blue (*Passerina cyanea*).

Male Painted Bunting lower photo (*Passerina ciris*).

Alva, FL.



This flower's for you. And the one behind it, and the next one and the next one and... You know what, they're all just for you!
Climbing Aster (*Aster carolinianum*). Caloosahatchee River, Alva, FL.



Spend a morning watching a manatee paddle slowly up a river and somehow speed isn't so important when you drive home.
Chrystal River State Park, FL.

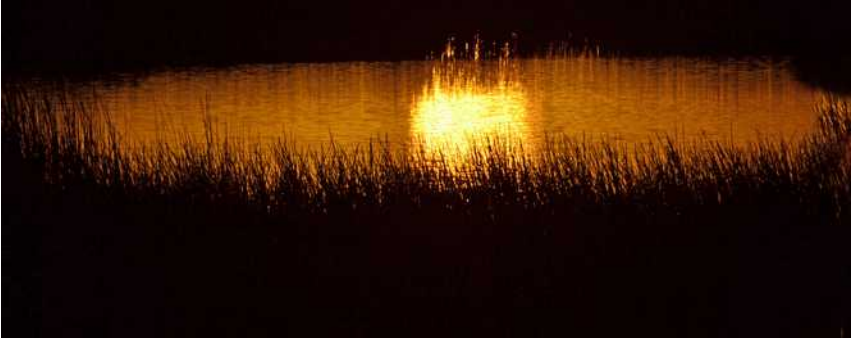


If I only had half the turtle's sense of direction... This turtle has an incredible sense of direction with the equivalent of a magnetic compass in its head. Twenty to thirty years after hatching, it is able to find its way back to its exact place of birth.

Loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*).



Up to no good. Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*).
Cape Coral, FL.



I sat at the edge of a marsh near dusk
thinking I was alone
Then noticed a brilliant ball of light
sitting across from me
on the opposite shore
I know you! I whispered
and waved a welcome hand
The ball of light responded
by waving back with a twinkle in its eye
So you've come for the show too I said
Of course replied the light
I wouldn't miss it for the world

Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



A Conversation With Tom

In the 1990s, I managed the eco-tours at the private 91,361-acre Babcock Ranch. My wife Marisa and I lived on the ranch, got married there, and spent our honeymoon in the swamp.
Nothing but the best for us.

In 2006, 73,239 acres were purchased by the state of Florida and became the Babcock Ranch Preserve. This area covers southeast Charlotte County and northwest Lee County. The remaining 18,000 acres is a private residential development that will eventually include 19,500 homes and 6 million square feet of community and commercial space. The town of Babcock Ranch is being constructed in phases and will ultimately be home to approximately 50,000 residents. There were fewer than 10 homes on the original ranch when we lived there.

After work I had lots of free time to hang out with some of the ranchhands. Tom was my favorite. I hated it that he was confined to a half acre enclosure during the day and a small 20'x15' enclosure at night. If I had had my way, he never would have been caged. I would often sit inches away from him, a thin chain link fence separating me from the 120 pound cat. Seldom did I face him unless it was to feed him grass -- which he loved. Below is a conversation we had one evening just before dark. Tom's voice is in italics.

You think it's fair for you to be in there?

For you to even ask speaks volumes about your kind.

Don't judge me so quickly. I'm just trying to stir up a conversation.

I'll take some more grass if you don't mind.

Now there's a legitimate question. How can you eat that stuff?

There you go again with the dumb questions. Let's talk about your diet.

My diet?

Sure. I've seen you wolfing down Twinkies and hot dogs. What's up with that?

Acquired taste, I guess. Don't knock it till you've tried it.

No thanks. I'll stick to raw meat and grass.

About that grass...why do you eat it?

Fresh green grass is rich in vitamins, minerals and enzymes.

That hasn't been proved.

What are you some kind of expert?

No but...

Look, if you'd put yourself in my paws, the answer is easy.

Consider that I eat herbivores. What do a lot of herbivores eat? Grass and other greens. For me, grass is an appetizer. And since you brought up the question of freedom, let me say that it should be a fundamental right of every life form.

Oh yeah? How free is the prey you catch?

As free as the prey my prey catches. We all have to eat. Where my hunger begins, freedom ends for the animals I pursue.

Is that fair?

Yes, in the sense that all of us have to eat to survive. Back to freedom being a right. Some of my species are occasionally psychotic and play with their prey while it slowly and painfully dies. But overall, we get the killing done quickly. Your kind robs other life forms of freedom, not just for food, but for entertainment, servitude or an abundance of testosterone.

What are you talking about?

Well, let's take fishing. Sometimes you eat what you catch. But often you hook fish, watch them fight for their lives, then unhook them and throw them back. Or you spend \$25,000 for an off-road truck, \$800 on a rifle, \$75 on a hunting license, take two weeks off work, then claim you're hunting deer or hogs for food, or to help manage populations. Or you cage up calves until rodeo time.

Then you whoop and holler while trying to lasso the terrified creature so you can throw it to the ground. Then you lock it up again. You may walk upright, but I have my doubts about your intelligence.

At least we're not afraid of water.

Who says I'm afraid of water?

Everybody knows cats hate water.

Really?

My housecat, Inspector Clueso, hates water.

Why do you call him a house cat?

Because he likes to be in the house.

He does? You mean you like to keep him indoors and he's gotten used to it.

You sure are cynical.

Yes I am, if you look at it only from your limited human perspective. By the way, I love water. In the wild, I'd think nothing of swimming half a mile across a river to get to land on the other side.

What about gators?

You take your chances when you're looking for a mate. Besides, it would be better than what I have here.

But you've got it made here! We feed you, provide you

with medicine and shelter. We also protect you so that
no one can hurt you.

*Oh wow! What a bunch of saints!! Thank you, thank you for all
you've done for me!*

Look, we humans have to have our animals. How else
can we study you?

Study us? Is that what you call this? I'm honored.

How about trying a camera?

It's not the same. We need a closer experience than that.

You're pathetic, you know it?

Do you realize the good we do? If not for us, a lot of animals
would become extinct. But we protect them in zoos and allow
them to mate there for the continuation of the species.

*Have you ever thought about why you really need to do this? Your
kind wipes out our habitats and much of what we prey on in the
process. After you've made us homeless, you feel the need to
protect and preserve us. I would rather go extinct.*

How much freedom do you need?

*As a male, I may roam up to 150 square miles while searching for
food and love.*

Can't you find it closer?

*Sure, if there were more of us left, as well as more food. Hey, look
at you. Your kind travels around the world searching for love and
happiness. C'mon.*

Let's change the subject. Who do you think is more important,
you or us?

What, are you a lawyer?

No, why?

*You ask already knowing the answer. Every animal thinks its kind
is the most important. The only difference is that most non-
humans realize that every life form is equally important in the big
picture. We rely on each other. We're interconnected. We only eat
what we need for the moment. We don't hoard our food or other
valuables beyond the needs of our near future.*

There you go with the cynicism again. And why the snarly face?

You're staring at me.

I'm just trying to make eye contact when we talk. Are you trying to intimidate me by brandishing those big teeth?

I don't have to try. You know you're afraid of me.

What makes you think so?

Which of us is on the outside looking in? Which of us has the key to the locked cage?

Who named you Tom anyway? That's so typical. Everyone names male cats Tom. I would have called you Tiedomahalavich -- or something more original...

Why name me at all? You don't hear me giving you a name, although plenty come to mind.





The Bench

Kaplunk!
I was dropped here as a seed
by something with wings
or hooves or claws
I really don't remember
Or perhaps I landed
after hearing that soothing wind instrument
forced through forgiving leaves
Whoosh...whoosh...whoosh...
rocking the branches of my mother tree
Disperse! Disperse!
The chorus sang
Followed by a quiet stillness
as I felt alone and vulnerable
and no longer connected
I recall my puny size
as I held my ground
while just a common seed

and -- after several attempts
of pushing through a blanket
of matted grasses and fungi...
I finally sprouted a thin
and flexible trunk
and drank in the morning dew
I soon found a friend...
a pine sapling
and a shrub of saw palmetto
We waved at each other
on windy days
and shivered together on cooler nights
Springs and summers came and went
while my tender branches added length
and my trunk added girth
Warblers begin to explore my hidden cavities
and contemplate raising a family
Dew was not enough to quench my thirst
I needed rain and it poured
My leaves sprouted and multiplied
Star-shaped bromeliads became cisterns,
trapping water for visitors
who flew over and crawled in
and whose lives were as brief
as a setting sun
I realized and appreciated
my good fortune and prosperity
Below ground the music returned!
I could feel it first in my roots
a heavy bass...trombones...
a soothing cello...slow, deliberate
The sounds reverberated up my trunk
then spread to my branches
where my leaves sang sweetly...
Whoosh...whoosh...whoosh
Disperse! Disperse!

Kaplonk! Kaplonk! Kaplonk!
More saplings and grandsaplings!
My family grew tall and traveled
to other fields beyond my reach...
Everyone began to look up to me
and leaned on me for support
By then I had become a habitat
and shade for scores of woodland creatures
Reaching maturity in my third century
and feeling as if I was on top of the world
No one was stronger, no one more flexible
No one happier or more sure of purpose
And for what seemed like an eternity
for a rooted life,
I flourished and watched
as the forest also flourished around me
I survived Arctic blasts of icy wind
fiery infernos brought on by bursts
of lightening that snapped at the air
and ignited everything within reach
And deep in the fibers of my inner trunk
I fought off micro organisms hungry
for the taste of wood
But the only thing constant is change
which I first noticed midway through
my fifth century
A feeling at first, starting with my arms
which became brittle and easy to break
Slow to heal
Rain continued to reach my roots
but they were also slow to respond,
to pass along my life blood
I remained full of great cheer
for below me, spread out over acres
and acres...
My offspring...were themselves maturing

and playing out their magnificent
supporting roles
And time...as slow as it passes
Is quickly used up
And like my birth
I scarcely remember my fall
though the sound was loud enough
to remind the living
that life is as frail as it is beautiful
And to remind me that I am now ready
for my next role
as a bench for the weary to sit on and rest
and contemplate their own journey



Enjoy it while you can

Enjoy it while you can
said the man about life
For weeks, I had been pondering his words
Enjoy it while you can
Then, while walking the shoreline
at Harns Marsh here in Lehigh Acres
My dog Darwin and I
stumbled onto tens of thousands
of empty snail shells
piled one on top of the other
Two days earlier, heavy rains
pounded the marsh
The waters rose fast
The snails crowded
the shoreline
just under the water's surface
feeding, breeding
enjoying it while they can

Forty-eight hours later
the water level dropped
as fast as it had risen
Stranding the snails
above the water line
where their gills were unable to breathe
Or perhaps they were sprayed as exotics
of South America
Either way, their vessels were now empty
or their occupants were rotting away
in the hot mid-day sun
I caught a strange odor
when I knelt and nearly touched them with my nose
With Darwin watching
I captured the moment
holding a human contraption
called a camera
When I pulled the camera back far enough
I wondered if the shells might be us
While alive, our bodies are containers
or vessels for storage and movement
holding only enough energy to get through a human day
and on through a human lifetime
But we are also that energy
bundled collectively in tiny packages
Trillions upon trillions
of sub-atomic particles and atoms
that change like chameleons
and bond with each other to form
molecules and cells
blood and skin tissue
legs and arms
ears and eyes
and a brain
that sometimes doesn't work
Near as we can observe

our containers
don't contain for long
Our vessels will only move
for a short while
before wearing out
But that energy in those tiny atoms
and sub-atomic particles
that we can't see
was circulating throughout
the Cosmos
for an eternity
before we ever knew
what a human was
Near as we can tell
they will exist in various forms
endlessly from here on
This isn't what I believe
It's what the bulk of evidence reveals
It isn't faith
It's a theory full of facts
that strung together
make the most sense – for now
Sugarcoat it with images of pearly gates
and golden mansions
with all of our families and pets
reunited together in the end
But that doesn't make it so
A reuniting of families?
Yes, in the sense that we may
link up with lots of atoms
we have bonded with before
Old friends
Really old
This news needn't be depressing
There is beauty in the process
Joy in feeling lucky enough

to understand a little
of what we are witnessing
Perhaps we'll find there is
an intelligence
directing such minute energy
We don't really know, do we?
But if there is no director
So be it
I am going to give it my all
for as long as I breathe
I am going to strive to be happy
and responsible with my container
and with how I interact with all
the other vessels of energy
that surround me
I so want life to mean something profound
beyond my brief stay here
I want to live forever – vibrantly
But it may all be meaningless
for our containers, or vessels
It may be that life is nothing more
than simple energy struggling to survive
And if there is an intelligence
it may be temporary in vessels like ours
or superior to ours on other worlds
or perhaps here
Molecules
groups of energy
that have figured it all out
And perhaps they manipulate
that energy for their own purposes
and have developed
the “best” or “fittest” way to survive
to get through “Big Bangs”
and wormholes and other dimensions
Or maybe atoms

and sub-atomic particles
harbor the real intelligence
and form super packs
of molecules and cells
to get the job done
Maybe Ying and Yang
good and bad
and the large gray area between
is the result of billions or trillions of years
of trial and error
Maybe the best and worst
that we see in ourselves
is just a microcosm of universal principles
of what we could expect to see everywhere
Maybe the joys and sorrow
we experience as humans
are obsolete or unnecessary
in individual atoms or smaller particles
Maybe they have evolved beyond such
human frailties
or venture into feelings at will
by bonding with each other
and forming containers and vessels
that say in passing
Enjoy it while you can

Join me on a Fossil Expedition



A lot of the photos in this book came about as a direct result of me driving to and from fossil sites, or while looking for fossils in SW Florida's creeks and rivers. I would be remiss if I neglected to invite you and your family, school or scouts to join me for one of my expeditions. Of course, I'm going to charge you but it's fun and educational, plus you get to walk away with pieces of the past (unless it's something worthy of donating to science). For more information, key in "FossilExpeditions.com."

Be ready to get wet and muddy!

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