

Diana Woodcock
Notes from the Field Finalist

BEGGAR IN THE EVERGLADES

It pierces my heart till I rejoice when the mosquito pricks my finger for blood to nurture her eggs, initiating me into the life cycle of this place to which I've come like meeting someone for the first time and feeling I've known her all my life. They tell me their life story, and I'm converted—born again—their waters, slow-moving shallow river rising with summer rain, baptize me. And I'm forgiven—sins of omission (failing to do the little I could do to protect and restore them)—draining, bull-doing of their sawgrass prairies. Washed in the blood of a million plume birds, I offer my body to be bitten, slashed, burned, but they neither punish nor scold; they are gentle, delicate even in their pain, in their sentient struggle to regain their rightful place. Sovereign in tenacity, endurance of extremes: drought, deluge, plenty, starvation, disaster. They are the sisters I never had—graceful, brave, beautiful. Symbol of fortitude, rainbow after the storm. Stasis in the mangroves, pivot of manatee and speedboat. I walk softly, silently—afraid of killing, injuring, disturbing anything in this fragile place. Red-winged blackbird taking over my favorite post and alligator dozing on my path remind me *I'm* the intruder—here today, gone tomorrow; they have been, will be, here forever. I lift up my cup and bowl for them to fill, walk humbly through sword-sharp sawgrass by the slough, admiring the slender beauties heaven-made: egret, heron, anhinga, ibis, wood stork, bittern, limpkin. Bowing before them, I pray for their flame that I might burn through the dark night and give light. Their flight and calls like alternations of Koranic recitations and mystical music. Let a green bird—heron preferred—descend on my head if indeed I am the elect. Let me make collyrium for my eyes from the dust kicked up by the alligator, that I might see more clearly and die pure. Let the master mixer of the red sulphur elixir, the roseate spoonbill, transform my soul into pure gold. Then, great egret white and delicate as falling snow, send me forth as arrow to pierce hearts set on destruction.