Beneath the lush turf are buried fortunes; the laughter of playing children; the sounds of sultry blues; and the smiles of those sneaking their first kiss. A sacred space where memories have left an indelible impression.

- Terri Lipsey Scott
On the Legacy Garden, at the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum
# Table of Contents

- Introduction: The Lost Creek by Thomas Hallock 11
- 1 Your Biome has Found You by Gloria Muñoz 19
- 2 Bayboro Improvements 21
- 3 In My Head by Brandy Nichols 25
- 4 Reifying Salt Creek by Michelle Sonnenberg 27
- 5 Fish Tales by Dave Pacetti 31
- 6 Drug Raids by Jack Alexander 33
- 7 ‘Dem Gator’ by Sally Gage 35
- 8 French Fried Monkey by Russell J. Crumley 37
- 9 Sewing Box by Hannah Gorski 41
- 10 Natural Contradiction by April Sopczak 47
- 11 The Ecology of a Gift: Lassing Park by Bob Devin Jones 49
- 12 Paddling Down a City’s Artery — Salt Creek by Jon Wilson 53
- 13 Trash Talk by Resie Waechter 57
- 14 The House on the Lake by Jacqueline Williams Hubbard 61
- 15 In the Legacy Garden by Sarah Kirstine Lain 65
- 16 Baby Bass by Wendy Joan Biddlecombe 67
- 17 Born on the Fourth of July: Mordecai Walker and the Roots of Protest by Arielle Stevenson 69
- 18 Nature and the City by Kent Curtis 77
- 19 Captured on the Shore by Roy Peter Clark 83
- 20 Tide, Trash A Problem by Bill Marden 85
21 Mini Lights, Mini Lights, Come out Tonight  
   by Eric Vaughan

22 Dead People by Cathy Salustri

23 Wild Salt Creek by Ariel Ringo

24 Thirteen Ways of Looking at Nature in the City  
   by Daniel Spoth

25 Straight Lines by Sarah Hierl

26 The Used To Be Tour by David Lee McMullen

27 The Wilderness behind Walgreens Anne Younger

28 Nest by Anda Peterson

29 Knowing Salt Creek by Alison Hardage

30 Blockage by Michael Sadler

31 Below the Canopy by Heather Jones

32 Gators by Amanda Hagood

33 But Where Did All the Mangoes Go? by Rosalie Peck

Contributors
-For Terry Tomalin

With thanks to the English Program and the College of Arts and Sciences at USFSP for support of this project.
Salt Creek Journal
“This creek runs behind Gryphon and Darwin’s house,” I told the neighborhood kid. The neighborhood kid was fifteen. He was coming off a difficult Spring, far more than the usual teenage angst. His mother is a geologist, and he should be into nature, but he’s not. Gryphon and Darwin used to live near us, in St. Petersburg’s Old Southeast neighborhood, until their mom got sick. The family needed a bigger place with the illness, so they bought a house near Boyd Hill, a treehouse on the ground, with a swimming pool and this clear little brook in back.

It was a rough summer for teens. My own son barely passed ninth grade, after struggling through an underfunded middle school that has succeeded most — I think — in eroding his self-esteem. He needed volunteer hours for financial aid in college, and knowing he would go more willingly with friends, I organized work crews here at
the nature preserve. We went Tuesday through Thursday mornings, usually with a friend (who was facing transitional problems of his own). A couple of other neighborhood kids joined in, high schoolers too young for jobs, too young to drive — angry they couldn’t sleep in, itching to get out of the house. We raked muck from the eutrophied stream banks; we plucked invasive Caesar Weed and Air Potato from the low-lying areas. We cleared out non-natives, refreshed the suffocating soil and dug holes for pots of beautyberry, firebush and Muhly grass. “Before Prozac,” I joked to the neighborhood kid, “people took nature.”

I was actually serious. I can footnote that claim. Puberty sucks. The teens in my life battle a rage they come by honestly. Nearly all of them struggle with something. I want them to put off the sex and drugs for as long as possible ... at least until they’re thirty. Not having much to go with, I pointed out the creek’s path. Maybe the lost kid would make the connection. Upstream, this creek runs through a culvert that is blocked at the preserve by a chain link fence, then behind Gryphon and Darwin’s house, before disappearing into water hazards on the nearby golf course. Downstream, it feeds into Lake Maggiore, then Salt Creek, where it becomes a ditch through one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The creek finally discharges into Bayboro Harbor, into Tampa Bay.

The kids volunteered because they had to. I gave my son five bucks an hour as incentive, in the hopes he would learn how to hold down a real, or paying job. A good life is cultivated, nurtured ... managed. For no good reason, our culture idealizes childhood. Since the romantic period we have clung to fantasies of innocent youth. Along with these dreams of golden-age summers, we harbor a jejune fantasy of unspoiled Nature — an untouched Eden that, of course, never existed. My great insight from volunteering? That wilderness is hard work. Before becoming a nature preserve, Boyd Hill was an exotic garden, featuring ornamentals like Ladyfinger Fern and Bowstring Hemp, invasives that volunteers like myself now pull up. I was weeding wilderness, growing a relationship. My son and I do not talk well. Kind words between fathers and sons bounce off hard surfaces. Instead of using words, we work. I cannot tell him how to respond to the situations he will face in his teenage years. I can only environ. We weed the preserve. We learn to connect.
Salt Creek Journal is a plea for connection. Self-produced at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, this little book looks for new ways to write about nature in the city. The project originated from a course in environmental literature that I get to teach most Spring semesters. For the past five years, I have guided students up Salt Creek, the fragmented channel that adjoins our campus. The creek itself, I should emphasize, is nothing special. No deep calling, no voice or vision ever directed us to this marginalized ditch. But pedagogically, or from a classroom standpoint, it offers both solution and challenge. Classes in nature writing pose definite logistical obstacles. The courses often involve travel. (We burn a lot of gasoline looking at wilderness.) The students at my school in particular often balance college with full-time jobs and family. They do not have the luxury to hunt down pristine Nature. So we stay close to home. Our focus on the local, in turn, has raised an interesting question: How do write about the nature right where we are?

Let me explain. In nature writing classes, students cannot resist the stock clichés. Wilderness. Fallen Eden. Pollution. (Not to mention the noble desire to “put litter in its place.”) Believing they should venerate Nature, given the name of our course, students retreat to the tired storylines: a return to simpler times, the “real Florida” that must have been beautiful — but was also hot, buggy and brutally violent. Rather than going back to pre-Civil Rights Florida, rather than falling back to these fantasy paeans to “untouched” paradise, we paddle Salt Creek. It has been a new kind of adventure. We drop kayaks and canoes off the docks at the campus waterfront, and paddle across the dredged harbor, up the channelized creek. With the new setting, different questions present themselves. How far can students go, aesthetically and literally? Do we look past the pollution? Most casual kayakers turn around at Third Street, or the “Thrill Hill” bridge. The braver souls shimmy under the low-hanging overpass at Fourth Street. Even few venture further, into the surprise wilderness that surrounds Bartlett Pond. From there, Salt Creek cuts diagonally across the street grid and through the city’s Southside, where a mangrove rookery hides in plain sight. At Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (or Ninth Street), the culvert connects to what is now known as Lake Maggiore — and what used to be a tidal estuary called “Salt Lake.”
Salt Lake? Or Lake Maggiore? The ecology is as confused as the name. Here, it helps to know the history. The channeling in the early twentieth century quickened Salt Creek’s tidal flow, disrupting the hydrology. Newspaper reports describe “confused” mullet that swam to their death in these suburban headwaters. The dead fish left a horrid stench, and so a dam was built at Ninth Street (now MLK), to keep fresh water in and marine life out. After 1925 the lake was called Margy-ory and today we say MaGORy, no doubt confusing Italians visitors (who reserve the hard “g” for “gh,” as in spaghetti or the composer Ottorini Respighi).

Land management, likewise, is muddled. Different share holders all complete. Boyd Hill shelters the southern shores, where a patchwork of ecosystems provides the perfect setting for Florida Ecosystem 101. Home owners on the north shore, adjoining Dell Holmes Park, enjoy spectacular views of this small inland sea. Along the west bank, meanwhile, the city continues to maintain a dump and mulch plant — certainly not uses conducive to recreation or watershed health.

Past the mispronounced Lake Maggiore, the creek loses its name altogether. The whole water system fragments, just as the name disappears. Old maps show east and west-flowing waters merging in the city’s swampy midsection. Intrepid paddlers can still trace a drainage canal past Maggiore, to Lake Eli (by the city dump) and almost to the Interstate. A friend and I once dropped kayaks into a slimy retention pond on the west side of US 19, and let the tide carry us through Clam Bayou and into Boca Ciega Bay. Very few people try crossing the county by water, however. The connection sadly is lost.

What happened? The city of St. Petersburg has enjoyed multiple opportunities to fold together the natural and built environments. When the celebrated landscape architect John Nolen laid out a plan in 1923, he proposed a green corridor that linked downtown and the barrier islands off the gulf. But Nolen’s visionary design, which would have used the low swale that is now the golf course, died the death of bureaucrats. A half century later, the city offered a similar groundbreaking proposal, a “Conceptual Plan” that
included a greenbelt between Salt Creek and Clam Bayou. Voters rejected that plan in 1974. The city maintains both “historic plans” on its website. Council leaders could dust off either one, the 1923 or 1974 versions, and still come off as forward-thinking.

One purpose of Salt Creek Journal is to restart the dialogue. Positive changes come, we believe, when people learn to consider natural flows alongside the concrete, asphalt, economics, and forgotten policy. The essays in this book originate from our school’s deep commitment to civic engagement, as well as our enviable location. The Salt Creek project started with a federal “Lead, Learn and Serve” grant at USFSP, overseen by colleagues in English, and the publicly-funded, internal award resulted in a “Friends of Salt Creek” website, which laid the foundation for the volume you now hold in your hands. The website (which is active and still growing) includes a timeline about Salt Creek and Clam Bayou, a photo archive, writings by students over the years — even a music video. The students and I have grown through this project, using the website to clarify our vision, to figure out how we can reconnect fragmented natural systems and a divided social landscape, to establish how we can heal watersheds and ourselves.

One big achievement so far: the students have recovered Salt Creek’s forgotten past. Salt Creek offers a different version to the oft-repeated, and more celebratory, accounts of our fair city’s past. Long ago, the enlightened leaders of St. Petersburg set aside waterfront tracts north of the city’s main divide, Central Avenue, to form a signature chain of parks. This visionary, inspired by the City Beautiful Movement, left the legacy we now enjoy today — the glorious “front yard” featured on postcards, where we take out-of-town guests, and where we gather on New Year’s Eve. But front implies back, and with the City Beautiful also came the City Ugly. Waterfront north of Central became parks, Salt Creek was zoned industrial. Since being dredged in 1913, the creek has served marine, oil and food processing industries. The working life of this waterway, indeed, accounts for its distinct charm.

The zoning also created a recipe for abuse and marginalization. Economics, nature and race would intersect at Salt Creek, often in
unfortunate ways. This should come as no surprise. Being a product of the Jim Crow era, the city of St. Petersburg carries a legacy of segregation in its DNA. Discriminatory laws in the 1930s forced the city’s African-Americans mostly into neighborhoods south of Central Avenue. Because Salt Creek cuts through the Southside, water quality has suffered. The lower part of the harbor has always been an easily overlooked space, and a haven for outliers of all kinds — crackpots, the homeless, chicken thieves, once a port of call for Colombian marijuana. The same liminal status, upstream, has allowed pollution to run rampant. In the 1970s coliform bacteria reached eight times the amount deemed safe for human contact. Mulch from the city dump blows into the adjoining park and lake. At the time of writing, the city deservedly caught very bad press for dumping sewage into Boca Ciega Bay. Yuck!

So what do we do? Salt Creek Journal speaks to the links between environment and community. It reminds us that the word ecology, from the Greek oikos, has its roots in home. It is a love letter to the Southside. Pulling together over five years’ work, student writers, professional authors and community members describe the life of nature in our city, with particular attention to lower Pinellas. The chapters follow a loose geographic structure. We start at Bayboro Harbor, journey up Salt Creek, explore Lake Maggiore and Boyd Hill, then cross the interstate, onto Clam Bayou and Boca Ciega Bay. Art, literature, historical insight and literary theory serve to restore the flow between our built and natural environments. We hold out a belief in positive change. How do we clean waterways and heal our society? When the creek becomes a culvert, what stories can we tell? What do we call the nature here? “Wilderness” does not work. Neither does finger-pointing and sermonizing. My favorite essays in this volume recover the beauty, or unique charms of an overlooked watershed.

Each essay in this volume, each photograph and artifact and poem, wrestles with an aesthetic but also moral problem. How do we see nature in the city? If a creek becomes a culvert, what does that semantic switch entail? How do we write about urban nature, when conventions otherwise fail? Can we find the proper seam between built and natural environs, turning forward the clock to 1974 — or
1923? We have worked to avoid some of the tired storylines, the “paradise lost” and “used to be.” We focus instead on the nature we inhabit everyday.

In closing, let me ask readers to imagine a future scenario. The year is 2030. A student who contributed to this volume brings a son or daughter to Boyd Hill Nature Preserve. The future child now has a teenager of his own. Salt Creek Journal has run its course. The kid reads this book in middle school, or maybe picked up a copy lying around the house. Parent and child work side by side at the preserve. (The parent prays the child will put off sex and drugs until he or she is thirty, at least.) But much has changed since 2016. Boyd Hill and Clam Bayou, no longer isolated, are now linked through a greenway. Committed policy makers have improved access and renewed interest in Salt Creek. Anticipating sea level rise, the city has set aside more urban green space. The neighborhoods retain their character, and the waterways their distinct charm, yet openness has replaced division and insularity. The future kid routinely explores this low swale by bike. While volunteering together, the parent makes a feeble effort to relate to the kid. “This creek,” the parent says knowingly, “actually connects to Lake Maggiore.” In the twenty-first century, however, kids no longer need this geography lesson. Our culture now sees the deep mesh between city and nature. We understand how watersheds connect us. “Duh,” the teenager shoots back. “Everyone knows that.”

May this future day soon arrive ....
Your Biome Has Found You
by Gloria Muñoz

And who will kiss open
the spine of the resurrection fern
that’s hunched like a widow, hunched
like a shamed child? How it locks and hides
and browns under the sun — a laborer’s
hands picking blistered tomatoes,
or a pile of bones, perhaps bird bones
— small, dry, silent.

Here is the damp and thickest marsh
of your interior wetland. And here,
begins your tundra of moss, rock and shrub.
Here is the thing you lost,
perhaps the saddest or loveliest thing
— remember? It was suddenly taken — as a fish
spine is plucked from its open body on an open plate.
And who will pry apart the arms

of the praying mantis who preys on her
lover? Who will resuscitate the tiny
bird whose head rests on a fallen nest? You are helpless and wild
here. A murmuration
of starlings pulses in your chest. A soundtrack
of breeding amphibians seeps through you. Cicadas
scream petrified from tree tops. The feral sounds
of wilderness sharpen your teeth.

It is November, goldfish scales crunch
under your soles, the autumnal scent
of a fire inhales you,
the aerials are coming and going.
While adding up all the dead things you carry,
you realize, there is so much dirt in you.
Still, your nautilus ears listen, waiting
to hear your native sea.

Originally published in Best New Poets 2013: 50 Poems from Emerging
Writers, ed. Brenda Shaughnessy (Charlottesville: Samovar Press/Meridian,
The Bayboro Improvements

Reclaiming Many Acres of Marsh Land and Transforming an Eyesore into a Beauty Spot and at the Same Time Giving the City a Harbor.

Without any effort at display, or “hurrah,” there is a piece of work in progress, which is within ten minutes’ walk of the city, and is being pushed to a successful issue, that, when completed will be a public benefaction as well as a private interest. This is the dredging of the bayou between this city and Bayboro. Without a personal inspection and an explanation of the plans, the magnitude of the enterprise can scarcely be comprehended.

Having heard of the dredging operations in this bayou, the writer embraced a favorable opportunity to go over the field of operations, and this is what was seen and learned: the bayou covers an area of about two by three blocks, and lies just beyond the city limits on the south, and is just north of Bayboro. It is a land-locked salt-water bay or marsh, with an outlet into Tampa Bay, and
receives the fresh waters of Booker Creek. It is exactly one mile from the Atlantic Coast Line depot, in this city, to Booker Creek, where it empties into this bayou near Bayboro. Within this mile are seven blocks in St. Petersburg, and this bayou adjoins the seventh block.

At work in the bayou is a large dredge twenty feet wide and fifty feet long, fitted with powerful engines, cutting, as it crowds ahead, a channel fifteen feet deep and thirty feet wide, discharging the sand and water through a line of pipes laid to suit, over bulkheads on the side of the bayou; the sand forming new land on the side, and the water running back into the bayou. The amount of dredging this machine can do in any given time depends upon the condition of the field of operation. If the sand is full of roots, grass, gravel or other resisting substance, its progress is necessarily slower than when pure sand is encountered. In the sand free from marsh grass this dredge has cut its channel seventy-five feet in a day. This dredge has been in operation seven weeks and during that time it did more execution than the one in use before it did in the entire year it was tried. The other dredge last year caused much delay because of breakage, the equipment not being equal to the requirements of the job. It finally got beached, and today an effort was made to float the dredge and put it in operation by equipping it the same as the dredge doing such excellent work.

The work is now progressing very satisfactorily, and the results being accomplished and the transformation in the surroundings are astonishing and valuable.

Already there has been cut along the outer edge of the bayou a channel thirty feet wide and fifteen feet deep. Eventually this channel will be about 340 feet wide, making thereby an excellent harbor connected with deep water in the bay by a sufficiently wide channel to meet the requirements.

This 340-foot channel surrounds on three sides a body of natural and made land in the middle of the bayou of considerable dimension; and Second Street, south, extended, will run through the center of this land. On each side of Second Street will be a tier
of lots, extending from Second Street to the channel, thus affording private access to docks, warehouses, etc., on this channel. The possibility that someday there may be a street-car line down Second Street to the water’s edge giving direct and excellent transportation of freight and passengers traffic into the city is kept in mind in making this improvement.

Besides, all that is being done in converting the bayou into a haven of safety and a commercial waterway, and transforming the marshy waste into valuable lands by filling and elevating it with the sand pumped out of the bayou, considerable other work has been done and is projected.

For instance, where Third Street, south, crosses Booker Creek marsh has been filled; the street made high and dry, and the contiguous lands have been or will be made the same. A substantial board walk, six feet wide, along Third Street connects the city and Bayboro. Meandering Booker Creek will be straightened so as to run in a straight line, as far westward as Fourth Street. Near the mouth of the creek is a natural fresh-water miniature lake, which also will be cleaned out, and in the channel, cut between this lane and the bayou, will be placed an automatic gate, which will close with the rising of the tide and open when the tide runs out. This arrangement will protect the lake and keep its waters fresh. This lake can be made a thing of beauty, and there will be the novelty of a fresh water lake on one side of the street and a salt water harbor on the other, both having the same channel.

Salt Creek, which runs southward through Bayboro, also comes in line for improvement. Like Booker Creek, it will be straightened and deepened to Fourth Street to a sufficient depth to accommodate pleasure yachts.

In making these water improvements there will be redeemed and built up a considerable area of land, which will be divided into lots for residential and commercial uses; and where for ages there has been naught but a marsh, inhabited by undesirable tenants, there will arise a beautified landscape occupied by happy homes of mankind.
In connection with this subject may be stated the fact that the Bayboro Investment Company have three flowing artesian wells on their Bayboro property, the number of which evidently can be increased at pleasure.

The water proposition in its varied forms, is well matured in Bayboro.

*The Evening Independent*
March 26, 1908
(courtesy, Times Publishing Company)
A snake with fins slithered over the oysters by the seawall at Bayboro Hall. The bright red stripe along his back gave away his demeanor — cocky, arrogant, bully. Mullet jumped about above the water. A red snapper was on the prowl just below. I yanked my pinfish toward the middle of the water …. I sat quietly, patiently, and anticipated the jerk of the line. I knew it was just about to happen. I was going to catch that monster and be the envy of all in my class. Moments later, my professor summoned us away from our poles. I pleaded for one more minute. I spread my hands a foot and a half apart, showing him the size of my future prize. As he shook his head slowly from side to side, I dragged my feet (and my pole) towards him along the seawall. After his lecture to the class and seeing the disappointment resonating on my face as I stared hopelessly back to the water, where my fish had got away, he asked, albeit in somewhat disbelief, if the snapper was really that big. Standing there with nothing but the small bait still swinging from my hook, I nodded that it was ... at least in my head.
The wind sweeps the surface of the water and whips my hair into my mouth, but it’s not strong enough to move the deeper undercurrent in the harbor. I move in that conflicted space, pushed on the surface, pulled from beneath. Turbulence from my paddle slaps the underside of my kayak. I consider it a shark, or a gator, before I remember the feel of a careless stroke and relax. I can relax. It’s at least seventy feet to the bottom, but I can swim. I am surrounded by docks. I am capable.

The creek greets me from the harbor like the face of a dirty, industrious sailor returned from sea. Every wrinkle and scar holds a tale, if I can sit and listen. I want to explore more of this sailor’s body, to watch the wrestling between physis and techne play out along crumbling docks and cracked sea walls that strain to hold up the fill in this industrialized old salt marsh. A multilayered ecotone lays before me where edge changes both subtly and suddenly. The channel narrows and gives way to estuarine edges just beyond the shipyards and boat slips. I paddle into the flux of the tidal flow.
— not quite in, not quite out, not quite stagnant. Everywhere, life is possible, brisk, and contagious.

The water along Salt Creek isn’t murky from silt and salt alone. In a watershed everything flows to the lowest point, and this is it. This is the way out, the culvert to the harbor, the slide of trash into our oceans. The whole south side of the historic city limits flows through here. It is easy to tell that access to fresh food is low, that styrofoam is the currency of convenience, and that trash cans are a waste of space. The litter is so dense it heaps up on itself and decomposes in place, making a new sediment of chemical particulates and plastic liners settling through the water column, becoming the basis of the food chain. Pneumatophores bob up and down seeking root. Invasive Brazilian peppers mixed in the mangroves burst with red berries. Two green herons sit in a tangle of branches feeding on the harvest. Three white herons roost in the protection of the creek’s canopy. I wonder how many bits and pieces of plastic their stomachs contain.

I wonder what the imprint of our constant marginalization looks like in places I can’t see.

There are margins on the paper where I write. I leave them blank for aesthetics. I leave them blank to give emphasis to the text. I place notes in them to direct myself. I do not squander my margins. The drive home is a margin. The soft parallel of time between night falling and falling into bed is a margin. The long breath I take after a classmate pokes a dead Great Blue Heron tangled in fishing line and mangrove branches into the creek’s flow is a margin. It is the timbre. It is the space through which a sensation or feeling resonates from the creek, through me, and back out again; it is the space through which the creek passes to become the creek I can know, the space from which things are created anew and left old and decaying at the same time.

St. Petersburg is no different than any other city. They all have back doors and alley ways where the unsightly and unwanted take refuge and root. Even in the country, even out in “nature,” people choose that one dirt road to dump their trash on. One thing is made shiny while another is destroyed. One thing is elevated while another is torn down. It is easy to say that the creek flows on. It is easy to see
how there is a shelter in this margin, to accept this new identity for Salt Creek, to normalize this particular marginalization of space. But, this is no justification. There is no right path for excusing what has been done here.

I follow the creek, a fissure of aqueous life through the land, curious to go where it goes. If you take a map of any physical space and strip away everything but water, the imprint left behind resembles veins in the human body. This visible network is like an endless flexion of a necessary life force — not because it is like that but because it is that. Nature reuses ideas that work. These marginalized channels, whether vein, or creek, or river, or back alleyway, carry life in all its forms to its farthest reaches. I reach with the creek to touch what’s real.

Tangled in mangroves at the north end of Bartlett Pond, the water is still. There is no perceptible current. My paddle disappears beneath the creek’s surface with each stroke, pushing back the unknown. I will push my way up this creek, out of sight and imprisoned by the mangroves that shelter it. I will pause in this margin and breathe through it. It exists with or without me, and I revel in its being, no matter how filthy it may be. Even here, there is pasture enough for my imagination.
I walk into the shady hideout. The smell of sulfur, burning hydrocarbons, beer, and fish stain my nose. Combined, these odors equal a recipe for home. The poor craftsmanship of the bar just emphasizes that backyard feel, while the view from the barstool frames it. Fish Tales is surrounded by boats in mooring, a marina to port, and adolescent like growth patch of mangroves forward. Year-round Christmas lights highlight the garage sale assortment of décor inside.

My beer sweats profusely and soaks the imported beer coaster, advertising a brand not sold here. The carvings on the bar remind me of a middle school desk. The lacquer is thick, yet worn to the point that it has preserved the partially warped and rotten wood. Blue collars and callused hands are my company. A rough crowd with good hearts and bad teeth, the patrons are as genuine as the bar itself. These people have made this place unique and express the salty qualities I grew up around.

Every couple of minutes a mullet flies out of the black water with no style or grace, and slams back into it, cleaning the muck out of its gills. The bartender watches me as I wash down another beer, losing my form and trying to keep my unbalanced barstool at ease, “ready for another one?” she says. Compared to other fish in these waters, mullet aren’t very desirable. The higher end of town prefers the tuna’s rich meaty texture or an exotic snapper’s tropical flavor. While everyone can go for a light and flaky grouper, mullet (much like Fish Tales) is an acquired taste.

Four legs with no cushion and my ass is happy sitting, staring out at the creek and its humble atmosphere. My elbows press against the bar, wet from the condensation of the pint. I order one more. As I lean back, the stool creaks with age, and the nails corroded by the salt air look like they are about to snap. The stool is on its last leg, but it still has a few more rounds left.
“What’s going to happen to us now?” asked Karrie Gass, twenty-three, as police arrested her three hundred pound husband and the Coast Guard prepared to impound their “only place to live” — a beat up, old twenty-foot, barnacle-encrusted boat in Salt Creek.

Her bearded husband, Howard, thirty-two, was one of eleven arrested in seven separate narcotics raids throughout the St. Petersburg area last night by city, county and state law enforcement agencies.

The narcotics net confiscated more than $10,000 worth of drugs, one hundred marijuana plants, one thousand marijuana seeds, some processed marijuana, two late-model sports cars, a panel truck and Karrie’s twenty foot boat.

It is believed the arrests may put an end to the bulk of the illicit drug sales to Pinellas teenagers.

Ten of the eleven arrested were twenty-one years of age or younger, and six of them were charged with selling marijuana or other hallucinatory drugs. All of the eleven were white.

“It IS my boat, you know, and I didn’t even get to see the warrant,” Karrie Gass said to a deputy as police searched the craft. Standing with Karrie was Mrs. Judy Morrison, twenty-one, who called herself “a friend of the family.” She also lived on the boat.

“That boat is the only place we have to go ... I don’t know where we’re going to live,” said Karrie, reaching over to pet a black mongrel, one of two dogs “in the family.” There also is a cat, who got lost during the excitement of the raid.

“We’ve done a lot of work fixing that boat ... I know it doesn’t look it, but it’s real seaworthy ... cept for a few leaks. We were going to Venezuela via the Caribbean ... we had a lot of plans ... a lot of dreams and now they’re gone. Nothing seems to work right,” she said gloomily.
Karrie, Mrs. Morrison and Gass have been living on the boat, tied to the dock in Salt Creek at the end of Eleventh Avenue South. The craft hardly looked big enough for Gass’ three hundred pound frame, let alone a home for three people.

“It’s not so bad,” Karrie said. “It’s a little hot, but we sleep out on the deck sometimes and we have that mattress over there.” She pointed to a double-bed size, dirty un-sheeted mattress standing on end at the stern of the boat. “Sometimes we sleep on top the cabin,” she continued. “The air feels good and the boat rocks back and forth. It’s real neat” ....

*The Evening Independent*

May 18, 1968

(courtesy, Times Publishing Company)
Go to every neighborhood in any town in the USA, and there are tales of strange individuals, obscure animals, and ghost stories that people tell each other at Sunday afternoon BBQ’s or late night’s around a campfire. St. Petersburg is no different. Sure we have ghost stories — some of the world’s finest are connected to the Don CeSar or the Vinoy downtown. Heck, we even had a monkey that made headlines internationally for his elusive antics. Now we have another tale to tell. Let’s just say it’s been around for a while, however, due to the location and the nature of the beast, the story is often simply chalked up to be “Just Another Gator” yarn.

In the area of Eleventh Avenue South on Fourth Street, a small creek babbles by boat yards and homes as it snakes up into Bartlett Park right near where Tony’s Meat Market used to be, close to the University of South Florida. This is the territorial stomping grounds of a prehistoric beast, a gator. Stories of the reptile seem to have been around for five to six years — some say more — about a gator that has been reported as being anywhere from ten to fourteen feet in length. It is also said that this big ol’ bull is missing his front right leg. Some even say he is missing one eye. Murmurs around the block say that Big ol’ Gator (BoG) eats dogs and chases children and watches the men as they come to hunt him, only to disappear in a wink of an eye when approached. Now, BoG is the name I have given this guy. Everyone else only calls him the Big ol’ Gator.

Sightings of BoG began years ago when he was a younger bull looking for love in all the wrong places. He ended up finding a home near Tony’s Meat Market. He came and went with the seasons and was never caught by Florida Fish and Wildlife Services. As the years went on, he grew bigger and more aggressive. It wasn’t until recently that residents had noticed his handicap, his missing front leg. He had begun going after pets and people, and now the locals are worried: will they or their loved ones be on the menu?

For six years now officials from the Fish and Wildlife Services have tried to catch BoG, but to no avail. He keeps slipping by them. News outlets including Fox News, Tampa Bay Times, and Bay News 9 run
stories on this beast sometimes, pressuring the Florida Fish and Wildlife to issue a lethal force order on BoG in July, 2013. But no one can find him. Many have seen him and some have snapped pictures with their cell phones, producing blurry images of a “gator,” and later claimed “That’s Him!” Still, no one has claimed BoG as dead. With bridge work going on near the Eleventh Avenue canal, BoG has not been seen this year ... yet.

An alligator will move away from the construction and disruption of his habitat. To this day if you are near that canal or Salt Creek, people on foot will be quick to tell you: “Watch out for the gator!” Not to worry. I will be looking.
Summer in Florida is hot, humid, and news-wise, boring. Most of us barely have energy to raise our heads, much less pay admission. Like snow-bound pioneers, we’re trapped inside, where air conditioners work overtime to make life bearable. By Labor Day, even reasonable mothers will leave their children unsupervised at the local mall. And why not? The short trip from front door to car door is enough to unhinge a nun. Grandmothers curse and careen into curbs as they drive, their cocktails of medications unable to regulate feverish bodies. Sweat rains inside their summer sweaters, rivulets of mascara and cologne snake down their armpits, coagulating underneath the plastic supports inside their walking shoes.

And that is how the slightest whiff of drama managed to captivate the Front Porch — the crowd of regulars who gather nightly at Rix and Jim’s front porch for an entire summer.

The economy had bottomed out, along with synonyms used to describe it. As if reading a thermometer wasn’t bad enough, the media recycled clichés like “the new normal,” “in these tough economic times,” and “The Great Recession.” Front Porch relationships had worn thin. People snapped at each other if the words “bubble” or “red” were used to describe anything besides wine. But fortunately, the Pinellas Monkey arrived in time to save us. We couldn’t have chosen a more dashing Messiah.

Earlier that Spring, several housewives, unemployed carpenters, and frustrated officials reported seeing a macaque monkey scampering through the tonier parts of north Tampa. A refugee from a local zoo or private home — with lax controls, the Tampa zoo couldn’t be certain if it was their primate or not — the little traveler was sighted almost daily. “Cute monkey seen eating from a bird feeder!,” “Monkey takes a swim in pool,” and “Monkey enjoys tweeting and cocktails” became frequent headlines and topics of conversation. One snarky reader set up a Twitter account in the monkey’s name directed at wildlife officials and would-be
captors, sending taunts such as “Bring it, I’ll fling it!,” and “Shock the monkey? Isn’t that a bit harsh?” A four-star hotel began offering banana-flavored cocktails to guests.

We grew more excited as he headed in our direction. By mid-summer the monkey had reached the southern tip of the peninsula, a dead end that would force him to swim across the Gulf of Mexico or hitch a ride over the Skyway Bridge. Our community followed his journey like NASA tracking a satellite. One morning, the monkey was spotted in Driftwood, an area just blocks from our house. That evening, Rix strolled onto the porch with a cold beer for our neighbor Laura, a glass of Chardonnay for George, and an update of his own.

“That damn monkey was in our backyard last night.” He stabbed toward the back of his house with a lit cigarette. “I’d swear to it.” He led our plucky band of explorers off the porch, through the side gate and behind his house. The garden, a perennial work in progress, is a jungle gym of brightly painted mirrors, chandeliers, and plants from the tropics. Tonight it looked like a Dollar Store Santaland. Puffs of white fiber filling, like the kind used to stuff dog toys, covered the ground and most of the branches around us.

“Look,” Rix pointed to a tattered pillowcase as evidence. “A cat won’t do that. A dog couldn’t get in here, and old Mister ‘Coon wouldn’t bother.” He had a point. Everybody knew the raccoon in question. A resident in the nearby drain, he nightly hauled his considerable frame above ground and sauntered onto the porch as we socialized, cleaning out dishes of food left there for the numerous cats Rix fostered. Mister ‘Coon was too fat and too lazy to shred a pillow, assuming he could even find one. He was more likely to savage the industrial-sized bag of cat food propped against the house.

George was impressed, but unconvinced. Jim and Rix’ front porch was a veritable oasis for wild animals. Why would Pinellas Monkey go out back? Laura kept faith that we had been visited. She hoped our little friend, who had worked so hard to find us, would avoid crowds and NRA members. Rix fretted, “Some fool with a gun will probably try to shoot him for dinner.” Rix fretted quietly. And while
we passed the time in the heat, I shared a story a friend told me many summers earlier.

As an artist growing up in Tuscaloosa, my friend Ron had a creative circle that included everyone from Daughters of the American Revolution to a Vietnam veteran with an acid habit and a license to drive big rig 18-wheelers. One of those friends, a trust fund dilettante, happened to own a chimpanzee.

The boy and his family gave the young chimp all the perks of childhood, including his own room in the house, human clothes and dinners at the table. Yet much like Joan Rivers, chimpanzees do not age with grace. Their faces grow thick and lined with furrowed ridges, their hair begins to fall out, and their personalities shift from cuddly puppies to crotchety midgets with an axe to grind. Ultimately, the aging and increasingly uncontrollable chimp was confined to an outdoor cage in the back yard.

On sunny days the boy, also older, would fetch a leash, load the monkey into the back seat of his father’s Cadillac convertible, and take him for joy rides around town. Locals loved it. They would wave as the pair passed by. The chimp waved back.

“From time to time,” Ron explained, “the two of them would end their trip at a local burger joint.” Like many southerners, Ron pronounced it MACdonnas. “The employees fought each other for a chance to toss french fries and hamburgers at him. That monkey absolutely adored milkshakes. Business stopped dead while everybody crowded around to get a better look.”

One day, perhaps agitated by indigestion or the noisy crowd, the chimp broke free, lunged through the service window and landed inside the kitchen. There was a long pause as the employees realized they were suddenly face-to-face with a wild animal. Screaming and tripping over each other, the kitchen crew raced for the back exit. The primate’s first impulse was to head up for safety, into the trees. So he did.
Hand over foot, the chimp grabbed onto the stainless steel handles and countertops, pulling himself up and into the store’s Frymaster. At 375 degrees, the monkey cooked himself to death in a basket of hot oil. Later, the manager unceremoniously removed the monkey’s golden brown carcass, as well as two basket of fries, and tossed everything into a trash dumpster near a corner of the parking lot. As word spread, people hurried over to enjoy a Coke and catch a glimpse of the world’s first french-fried monkey. Someone told Ron those were the busiest three days ever experienced by the local MACdonnas.

I looked around at my audience. Laura had one hand clamped over her mouth, as if I might conjure up a plate for her to eat. My partner George was eyeballing his glass for a refill. Rix stood up, plucked the wine glass from George’s hand and pointed a cigarette in my direction.

“Well,” his voice deep, gravelly, and foreboding. He spoke in little Bette Davis bullets. “I’ll tell you this. That monkey comes here. Gets in my backyard. Tears up my garden again. I’ll be serving french fried monkey off my front porch.” Then he turned before disappearing inside, adding, “I’ll even offer curbside service.”
Sewing Box
by Hannah Gorski

A classmate tells me she’s paddling up Salt Creek to retrieve the dead heron our class found on the last trip. My eyes shift from the paper I’m reading to squint over the harbor. This opportunity, I know, cannot be passed on a day like today. I remember the bird, a Great Blue, the largest of the herons in North America. I had not expected that blue, tangled mass strangled by skeins of fishing line. The bird’s sodden feathers spread with the pulse of the current. His neck, devoid of any muscle tension, hung on the water. The clear membrane over his eye, used to clean his vision during life, reached from the corner socket but never fully rinsed his death-sight. I remember imagining his final hours, caught in a line so carelessly discarded, and not able to understand the reason why he lost his flight — and that’s when nature caught me in the throat.

My classmate says she saw the heron on her last outing up the creek, and she and my professor believe it would be good to preserve the bird for future students. I agree, and together we load a canoe with a forty-gallon bin, grabbers, and work gloves. Our professor meets us prepared and says a colleague in the science department explained how to strip the meat from the bones. He says, “Wrap the body in window screen and put it on an ant hill for a couple days.” I cringe. I’m not sure how much I want to find this animal, but I can’t back out now, even if we all feel bit uncertain.

We make it to the spot where the bird died. We find the fishing line, but we don’t find the animal. We assume the watery-murk swallowed his body, and we accept decomposition as a way of nature. So, we gather the line, and call it a curiosity of the creek. We find other objects and place them in a jar: a lost tennis ball, a Capri-Sun pouch, a used condom. Salt Creek is the lowest part of the watershed. All the nitty, gritty, nasty stuff in South St. Petersburg collects in that water. Flowing from Bayboro Harbor to Lake Maggiore, the waterway provides a scope to understand the neglect afforded to nature as well as the neighborhood through which it flows. Red mangroves act as barrier walls and block the city from the creek and the creek.
from the city, so the heron never had a chance because for this neighborhood the creek is invisible.

At the Fourth Street Bridge, I see a scarlet flash from the aquatic dun. At first, I think it’s a tackle box, but it’s not. It’s a sewing box. A button-up shirt floats nearby, and sticks, and leaves too. We fish out the box and take it back to campus. My professor wants to use the box to display alongside student papers, “Who wants to clean it up?” he asks. For some reason, I volunteer.

At home I hose the sewing box down on the patio. I take out the contents, careful to touch as little as possible. I know the creek’s history. Nearly every decade since the first dredge in 1913 shows a battery of offenses. Fish-kills, dumping, and high levels of coliform stem from just one period of the creek’s past. Early ignorance from city planners now shifts toward carelessness. The real problem with Salt Creek is that it flows through a neighborhood which is just as marginalized as the creek itself, so few people even think about restoring the waters.

To read landscape is also to anticipate the possible, to envision, choose and shape the future: to see, for example, the connections between buried, sewer stream, vacant land and polluted river, and to imagine rebuilding a community while purifying its water.

— Anne Whiston Spirn

Salt Creek and the Southside intersect in a way not uncommon for many communities. A sidelined neighborhood in West Philadelphia was built atop a creek bed, the lowest part of the watershed. Landscape architect and professor Anne Whiston Spirn devoted her career to the area. Her writings reveal the damage there, which transcends the physical landscape to plague the livelihoods of the people who call the place home. In 1987, she started the West Philadelphia Landscape Project to educate the community. Spirn and her students from the University of Pennsylvania worked with middle schoolers and local gardeners and found the people held differing perspectives. The students accepted the preconceived
notions that their city was a trap, a place forgotten and without successes. The gardeners worked with the earth. They understood the land and attempted to shape it for the future — still they say, they saw problems. Spirn writes about landscape literacy, a concept bringing together the history, the geography, individual anecdotes, and ideas for the future to sustain a local community. Care and understanding provide the building blocks for improvement, so the middle schoolers uncovered the past, joined community elders in the garden, and allocated newfound smarts to gain support for state funding to improve their neighborhood. The students became landscape literate. If Salt Creek is acknowledged, if the creek is understood and respected, then local pride can latch to the mangrove roots to force an amendment to the status quo. The sewing box provides one thin layer to the story of Salt Creek; it just needs a scrub.

Water from the garden hose dilutes Salt Creek from the fibers of the crimson cloth. Spools of thread, the bobbins, and all the buttons lighten as the water rinses each surface. Loose string intensifies the gross into a spider web of leaves, twigs, buttons, card-like paper, and on each object, I know, an unknown pollutant lingers. Leaves drop from hidden spaces. I can only imagine what has sifted through the boundaries of this container. I tip the box to drain the water. A crack in the front releases a broken section from the side and I place it on the patio and continue. I smell the creek—the stench is dirty and sad. Red fabric covers the three levels of the box. The bottom is made of three sections, used for larger items like scissors and packets of needles. The section above provides three equal rows for bobbins and spools of thread. A rusted screw mocks the support for the middle section, and I find a screw from my own toolbox to use as a replacement. The top rack splits into six compartments for thimbles, buttons, and other small objects. I place all the items in a cooler and carry the box and trinkets upstairs to let them dry near an open window. I’m not sure if I regret my decision to clean the box. My boyfriend says the box belongs in the dumpster. I tell him, “It’s for school.”

I separate the unruly strings and place the spools upright on a cookie sheet. I find an envelope of twelve sewing needles that cost
ten cents. Manufactured in England by a company called Milward’s, the long eye needles have started to oxidize. Everything looks old. I read different button companies: Genuine Pearl, Quality Button, and Lansing. The spools are from Clarks and Talon and range from thirty-five cents to sixty cents. My mind wanders to the exchange at the sewing shop; and now, somehow, the bobbins and buttons survived their history to land in my living room. Stowed under the spools of thread and behind the buttons is a business card of Pinellas County investigator C.R. Lucas. I think the last owner of the box was homeless. He made his home by the creek, and hung onto the business card. Later, he lost his sewing kit in the low-tide foul. Homelessness is characteristic for the creek.

I place the spools, bobbins, and buttons in a bowl and let them soak in a vinegar-water mixture. Then, I take an old toothbrush, dip it into the vinegar, and scrub the fabric. I scrub the hinges and the supports. I scrub the screws and the connectors. The lock and key, I scrub, until they shine. I take a break and think about the community garden in Spirn’s essay. The local effort won awards from city-wide competitions and the garden served as a tool to join students with an older generation, but the garden also served to teach the kids how to understand and care for the landscape. I return, and see the thread show its color as it dries: black, brown, navy blue, purple, and white. A threaded needle loops and punctures the last used spool; it’s brown. The exterior still looks drab, so I continue. I move the brush in a circular motion over the golden swirls which wrap the bottom edges of the box. The design follows the border of the lid. I wipe the dirt and grime with a paper towel, and then again take the brush to the wood. Next, I take the breakaway section and force it back into the side tongue and groove joint. I reinforce the fit with glue, and then I let everything dry.

The fabric loosens as it dries, so I glue down the corners. I place the spools on their proper shelf and the thimbles and buttons up top. I move the lid back and forth to test the new screw, and the shelf falls again. It’s okay, I’ll be careful until I find a new fitting. The rust gives way to a hint of shine, but the creek still scorches my nose. The smell should stay.
I take the weekend to clean a box and preserve its history. This narrow band of Salt Creek’s story offers an easy restoration because it’s easy to focus on a single object. However, the creek is a living system; it has many parts, and each requires direct care and attention. The numerous species who make the creek home deserve better than the Great Blue Heron. The box provides a window through which the community may peer beyond the mangrove walls, so perhaps next time, the animal trapped in a monofilament snare will be saved. But I wish we could have saved the bird’s body, rinsed the muck and pollution from what was left and dignified his skeleton with preservation. Display his insides, the structure of his bones and the way they fit together to show us how to fly.
“Get down! Shots fired in the park! Get down!” Except, I didn’t get down. My heart raced like mad as I thought about the children outside on the playground. I ran to the door. I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do, but I knew I had to get to those kids. As I ripped opened the door and looked out across the playground, I saw that the kids were already down, flat as pancakes, silent as church mice. The moment the sound of bullets rang out, every child had hit the ground. They didn’t need to be told what to do. They lived this mess. The time I spent working in Bartlett Park in 1997 is something I still think about. Tucked into the heart of one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, the park is a beautiful work of civil engineering. However, the natural salt-lake and acres of green grass belie the urban nightmare that is the reality of the forgotten. I witnessed a slew of faithful city workers do their best to protect the children. They spent every morning ridding the park of used condoms, broken crack pipes, empty bottles, needles, and a myriad of other discarded dangers. The workers carefully planned programs and activities to try and teach the children, and give them something more than the chance of birth had provided. But, no matter what the effort, life has a dirty way of creeping in on them. When I think of Bartlett Pond, I can remember its beauty. However, I will never forget its struggle either. No one should.

Look around, it’s beautiful
This park built on the pond
There’s miles of grass
Tennis courts, a playground to climb on

Look around, walk across
The perfectly built dock
Cast a line, catch a fish
A cat, a red, a trout

The mangrove trees drape with grace
Along the sparkling water’s edge
You’d never know what lies beneath
In muck too thick to dredge
Look down, look close
You need to know what’s there
Broken glass from broken lives
From far too little care

Look down in the grass, look beneath
The surface of the shine
There’s condoms used, casings spent
Empty bottles of 20/20 wine

Pick it up, don’t let them see
Keep them safe from what harm you can
You never know what’s tucked inside
Of lives too poor to stand
The Ecology of Lassing Park
by Bob Devin Jones

Here are a few interesting facts regarding Lassing Park. The park has over one hundred palm trees. The palms grow throughout the park; most of the trees are clustered near the west side. Several large groupings of palms divide the park’s seven meadows, two being as large as an NFL football field. One fallen palm continues to grow and resembles a dinosaur. Magnolias and live oak dominate the northern and southern ends of the park. As you look across the bay you can see downtown Tampa and Apollo Beach. Further north, you see the red tiled roofs of the Coast Guard facility and the St. Petersburg skyline. You may have your dog unleashed in the park; it is required, however, that “Rover” be under voice command.

The endless beauty of Lassing Park, from its gently curving shoreline to the meeting of earth and sky in the near eastern horizon, is a wonderful sight. The way the sky seems to collide just above your head when you are standing at the shoreline is truly delicious. The beguiling, near natural panorama assuredly would have made Walt Whitman pause, sigh, and write a poem. The varied ecologies play host to a staggering array of visitors — aquatic, human, feral and airborne. These various ecologies have shaped the scope and nature of Lassing Park for nearly a century.

Here are just a few ....

The Ecology of the Gift

The very special nature of a gift is that it (the gift) is mostly unanticipated and almost entirely undeserved; unless of course you happen to be a three year old and it’s your birthday or you are headed to the altar, registered at Pottery Barn and have thus coerced your friends and family that some sort of gift is expected. Lassing Park, on the other hand, is a gift that I anticipate every time I drive south on Fourth or Third Street, while heading home to the Old Southeast.

An exceptionally charming neighborhood, the Old Southeast is just minutes away from downtown St Petersburg by car or
bike, and about twenty-five minutes on foot. Gifted to the city by Judge Robert B. Lassing in the early 1920s and dedicated in 1942, Lassing Park is nearly thirteen acres of spiritual, bucolic, contemplative enchantment on the shores of Tampa Bay. The park stretches from Twenty-Second Avenue South to just beyond Fifteenth Avenue South and the U.S. Coast Guard compound. Magnificently maintained by the City’s parks and recreation department, Lassing Park is in a state of constant transformation, and depending on the weather, a delightful place to just sit and ponder or stroll at land’s end.

Through nearly seven months of tropical summer storms and winter atmospheric mayhem, or blustery spring afternoons when the kite surfers are out in numbers, Lassing Park is a gift that just keeps on giving. Occasionally, after a particularly severe storm, small ponds will form in one of several meadows in the park, and dozens of palm fronds will have lost purchase from the trees and become scattered throughout the park and along Beach Drive. Within a day or two, Parks and Rec has restored the park. The maintenance of Lassing is an admirable effort, as the park is not overly manicured. Rather, Lassing Park is an urban nature preserve with benefits, such as numerous benches, water fountains, doggy bags, trash retainers and numerous landscaped grouping of palm trees, where the invitation to sit is very persuasive. The TLC of Lassing is definitely a gift.

The Ecology of Sun and Moon ... First Impressions

It is commonly understood that most of us have only one opportunity to make a first impression. (Alas.) Lassing Park, on the other hand, seems to make a lasting first impression every time you see it. There are many ways to vantage the park before you actually see much of it, or even set foot on the grass. There are seven streets that head east into the Old Southeast neighborhood (eight if you include Fifteenth Avenue South). All of these streets give tantalizing glimpses of the park and Tampa Bay. Some streets serpentine their way east to Beach Drive; others, such as Twenty-Second and Nineteenth, are on a straight line. An example of the power of the park to always “first impress” is when you head east on Nineteenth Avenue South, from Fourth Street. A stand of trees partially obscures the four blocks to Tampa Bay and the park.
If it is night and a full moon has just started to rise, it may appear that a large glowing orb has somehow, lodged itself at the tops of the trees. By the time it takes to drive to Beach Drive, however, the moon has magically retreated over the bay. Not nearly as large, much farther and higher in the eastern night, the moon is now trailing a shimmering ribbon of light that laps against the shoreline, bathing Lassing Park in a luminous glow ... it is a magical sight.

No matter how many times you see the moon rise out of Tampa Bay, it is an arresting sight and often silently disconcerting. A full or nearly full moon rising out of the bay can appear as yellow as the sun. As the moon slowly rises for the briefest of moments you imagine the moon and the sun have exchanged their accustomed appearance in the sky — a lasting first impression indeed!

Many mornings in the Old Southeast begin with a riot of auburn color painted on the clouds. The clouds seem to take the cue from the approaching sun and gather lazily on the eastern horizon to herald the sun’s arrival. It seems as if the sun rises more slowly than the moon, as the clouds are blushing amber for a very long time. “The clouds, the clouds, the clouds are on fire ....”

The Ecology of the Water ... and the folks who live nearby
As I write this epistle, the water in the bay is a rolling slate gray. Tiny white caps break on the sand bar nearly a half a mile away. I have lived across from Lassing Park for nineteen years. The color of the water changes depending on the wind, the time of day, the time of the season, or just the whim of nature. Often the water changes color as you get further away from it, or the water gets further away from you — the changing of the tides. The water can be very still. I particularly enjoy the bay just after or before a storm, when the water appears almost black, restless. It is during these stormy times I sense this body of water is connected to the Atlantic, not just to the Gulf of Mexico. That’s the time I feel I would like to be in or on the water, skirting over the tiny waves and avoiding collision with “sky surfers.” The kite surfers appear to have dominion over the sky and the water. Their tiny boards lift them high above the tops of the trees and out into the gulf at incredibly bracing speeds. On any given day, when there is sufficient breeze, you can see these sky
riders initialing the horizon with their signatures, sometimes way past sunset.

The activity of the fishermen is daily, often rain or shine. Sometimes these “fishers” throw nets from the middle shoreline or they are casting from a boat. At any distance they create a marvelous silhouette in the water and very lasting impressions of Lassing Park.
The phantom, the devil-beast — yes, The Legend of Salt Creek — does not have a name.

But The Alligator lives indeed.

Last summer, The Alligator ate a dog. Now that big armor-plated dickens lives — where? Certainly in the minds and on the lips of dozens of Salt Creek children.

They trot its banks from Lake Maggiore northeast to the Thrill Hill bridge, gazing wide-eyed at foolish people in a canoe. “You in there with that alligator?”

Past Thrill Hill, that belly-bouncing bump on Third Street South, the Salt Creek story changes. There’s a city political fight going on, for one thing, but that’s hardly news.
This part of the creek is boatyard country. Sales, repairs, supplies. The smell of fiberglass and the whine of sanders. Docks and high-and-dry marinas. People from Keokuk, Iowa, puttering around in their little powerboat, raising beer cans and yelling, “Heyyy ... fun in the sun.”

It’s also a neighborhood where old St. Pete houses belly up to both sides of the creek, and where proud residents are willing to go to City Hall to fight. They like their down-home style, a kind of country-and-Key West combination.

Florida Progress, Florida Power’s daddy corporation, is in there pitching, too. The power people own lots of property on the north bank. They want to put a big marina in Bayboro Harbor, and maybe do some other things along the creek.

In Bayboro, where the dirty creek meets the dirty harbor, commercial fishing boats tie up three deep at the Pinellas Seafood docks. There’s Little Pam from Pascagoula, Elizabeth D. from Tampa, and Teri M. and Tina Rae, and a dozen others. They are battered ladies, rough with peeling paint and barnacles. On one, a hard-eyed crewman, cigarette dangling, stares a moment at two canoeists. He turns away abruptly.

As Salt Creek ends abruptly.

One moment: fisherman, tramp boats, rattling halyards. Next moment: Bayboro Harbor’s expanse, with its sailboats cutting against the backdrop of a college campus, state buildings, an art museum and a slick, new media center.

Discounting portages, frustrations and sightseeing, it might take a little more than an hour to canoe this south St. Petersburg waterway, a brackish stream meandering from Lake Maggiore to the harbor.

But Salk Creek will never appear in flashy literature promotion wilderness river trips. Only weirdo newspaper people really want to paddle this creek. You might call it urban canoeing at its ... um ... well, at least it has personality.

First, there aren’t many places to put the boat in the water. The
Red Cross will hound you to Hades if you just drop a canoe over a seawall and hop in. Bartlett Park lake, Salt Creek’s halfway point, appears to be the best place. A few gentle banks invite a launching.

Besides, there is Nature: a pretty park, a shining lake, jumping fish, ibis poking their curved bills into soil under the graceful palms. Here a little green heron, there a great blue heron. Not bad for being in the midst of the metro.

Don’t be fooled.

Unless the tide is very low — very low indeed — you will not get under the Twenty-Second Avenue South bridge. Forget southwest. Go northeast. And be prepared to fight the tide if your timing isn’t right. Salt Creek, and hence Bartlett Park lake, is tidal. There are mullet, mangroves and other items suggestive of salt water environment. Old-timers say the creek is a winter home for snook.

The Eighteenth Avenue South bridge is better. Duck a little and you’re okay. Beyond it, between the Wedgewood Inn and a motel, there’s jungle. You might as well be on the African Queen. You’ll push and slap through branches. You won’t paddle, you’ll pull your way through by grabbing leaves and twigs. Too low a tide, and you might have to slog through clutching muck. Don’t wear loafers. Hope your companion doesn’t make you pour out your drinks, like Hepburn did to Bogart.

Then, just when you’ve beaten the wilderness, just when there’s blue sky, and white clouds, and geez, the white cliffs of Dover ... there’s the Fourth Street bridge.

It has a thick pipe under it, running smack across the waterway. Situation impassable.

“I’ve gotten under that before, at real low tide,” said Larry Mastry, who runs a bait and tackle shop on Fourth Street near the bridge, and who dealt gently with the pair of wild-eyed canoeists who entered his shop. Probably suppressing an urge to call for government help, Mastry instead kindly pointed out a spot upstream — or was it downstream? — where the canoe could be shoved in again.
After that: easy living. Right under the Thrill Hill bridge and beyond, on past the oily, rainbow sheen floating on the water near the fishing fleet, to the sailboats flitting in the harbor.

You can also put in southwest of Bartlett Park and paddle to the dam at Nine Street, just before reaching Lake Maggiore. It’s a residential area and the creek is more like a drainage ditch here. A pit bull named Boxer, obviously unaware of The Alligator, may jump in and swim after a canoe. You can paddle Lake Maggiore, too, but you’ll have to portage. There’s no passing the dam.

Is all worth the paddle?
Debate it.

Salt Creek and its couple of miles of changing character is an unusual, rarely glimpsed part of St. Petersburg — even though it’s a part often in the news these days. At both the Bayboro Harbor and Lake Maggiore ends of it, there is talk of change involving city and civic participation. There is a nice lake in the middle. And there are spots of strange startling beauty that will make you think of something lost.

The stream is also hard to navigate, ugly in place and possessed of an odor that will knock the mink oil off your Topsiders. Then there’s The Alligator ....

*The Evening Independent*
February 24, 1986
(courtesy, Times Publishing Company)
Do not pick up any of the trash. My professor’s words echoed through my head as I paddled my canoe down Salt Creek alongside my fellow Nature Writing classmates. The creek was completely polluted. Styrofoam cups bumped against my oar and the shine of old Doritos bags caught the sunlight as they bobbed up and down in the waves against the mangroves.

My first reaction, upon being instructed by our professor to leave the trash alone, was one of shock. But it’s litter, I wanted to protest; isn’t this a nature writing course?

Dr. Hallock informed our class that he wanted us to look at the creek without any judgment; he wanted us to go into the creek and explore it without trying to “fix” or “save” it somehow.
This brought me back to a volunteering trip I took to Central America last spring. A small group of students and I traveled to Guatemala to build stoves for indigenous Mayan families. Everyone we met was living in absolute poverty. As we traveled through the villages, many of us were surprised to see there was trash everywhere in the huts. I remember even the nicest of residences had giant piles of garbage in them. When we brought this up with our professor at the time, he asked us to think about why we were so shocked. It made me question, what is so different about their trash from ours? We also have piles of trash in our homes in the States; they are simply hidden in opaque plastic bags contained in stainless steel bins so we can’t see them, lids closed tightly so we can’t smell them, and foot pedals so we don’t even have to think about our hands going anywhere near them. Our trash is tied up with little knots and bows to keep the smell down and the appearance tolerable — some trash bags actually come scented now — and then, our perfumed garbage is placed on the curb and picked up by a giant, gas-guzzling semi-automatic.

We feel better about it because we do not have to look at it anymore. We don’t have to smell it rotting in our house and we don’t have to think about it being burned, rancid clouds filling the sky with stench. The more affluent parts of the city have beautiful lakes and parks; city employees are paid to clean up the litter on a regular basis. And until a few weeks ago, I thought that that was what real nature was: obvious, beautiful, untouched. Coiffed.

Here on Salt Creek, though, we are in a different part of town. We are paddling through the water alongside the lower-income neighborhoods. There is more culture here, more diversity. And less money. Nobody is paid to come here and clean up the trash. The postcards of St. Pete don’t have pictures of this area, and it is not listed in the brochures of places to go — even though it is just blocks away from the heart of the city downtown.

The trash in this creek is similar, in a way, to the piles of trash I saw in Guatemala. It is a reminder that Nature is different for everyone. We separate ourselves from each other, and from Nature, at the
same time and in similar ways. The garbage in Salt Creek points to a certain truth about the people who live nearby — and those who choose not to. We could have picked up the litter along the creek that day in class, sure. We could have picked it up and carried it out, taking pictures of our “good deed” and feeling better about ourselves as we climbed into our cars and drove down the road. But then we wouldn’t have seen a thing.
I grew up in North Carolina during the Jim Crow era. My immediate family consisted of my parents, my three older brothers, and one much younger one. We had many uncles, aunts, and a few cousins we would see quite often, as most of them lived in or near Chapel Hill and we lived only 115 miles north. Much time and energy was spent protecting us from the ill effects of segregation in the Deep South. We lived in a middle class part of the Black community. We went to a Black church. We went to an all-Black school. All of our friends were Black. All of our teachers were Black. My dentist was Black. Our family doctor was Black and had gone to medical school with my grandfather. Everybody I knew lived in my neighborhood, including my mother, of course, who walked us to school every day and taught me in the sixth grade.

The year I was in the sixth grade was a very difficult year because, although I sat in the back of the class and called my mother “Mrs. Williams,” everyone knew she was my mother and she called on me all the time. I felt like her pet. She even cast me in the play Sleeping Beauty as the princess. I was so embarrassed. If the truth be told, the only White people I saw as a child on a regular basis were the milkman and the postman. We shopped for shoes and clothes, mostly in Durham and Chapel Hill, where my mother’s family had lived since the mid-seventeen hundreds and my grandfather was a relatively prosperous physician. Of course, everybody knew us there, too. My father was born in a tiny town named Weldon and that is where Mother and Father settled after graduating from the same college in the same year, 1938.

Every summer my brothers and I visited Chapel Hill and stayed at the Caldwell family homestead with my Aunt Lucille, who lived there.

What a beautiful place it was. Big, wide, and painted white, with a huge wraparound, covered porch. The porch had a swing and lots and lots of potted plants. The homestead was built after the Civil War by my great grandfather, Wilson Caldwell, the son of November Caldwell, our great-great grandfather, who was born in 1758. It was expanded upon by his son, Dr. Edwin Caldwell to include bathrooms,
more bedrooms, a very large kitchen, dining room, and parlor. There were huge rocks, some eight feet tall or more, scattered about the front yard, dating from the Ice Age, we were told. We loved climbing them, hiding behind them, and playing around them. Nearly all of our relatives lived nearby. We visited each of them often. Two of our uncles lived around the block, on Caldwell Street, which was named after our ancestors.

My father felt a bit stymied in Weldon, and after earning his master’s degree and completing all his coursework for his Ph.D., he was hired as a full Professor of Chemistry at what was known in the 1960s as Gibbs Junior College, a segregated community college in St. Petersburg, even though he was ABD — all but dissertation. My father moved down to St. Petersburg a year before we did. After my two older brothers started college, the remaining five of us moved to St. Petersburg, but only after I completed the eighth grade. The family car was packed, and as soon as I gave my Valedictorian speech, we were whisked off to Florida. I cried the entire trip but no one showed any sympathy for me. My mother would simply hand me clean Kleenex and take my old ones. By the time we got to St. Petersburg, I could hardly see. Once again it was a segregated life, but not so nice as my old one. It was harder to protect us from the ugliness of racial segregation because it was so “in your face.” It was everywhere, even in our all Black St. Petersburg neighborhood. There was no escape. The protection of family was all I had left. My old North Carolina neighborhood was gone. My mother and I watched “The March on Washington” on television together in 1963. I will never forget the young Black children who had dogs and water hoses forced upon them. I remember the Freedom Rides and the Civil Rights Movement. I couldn’t wait to get involved in it, even though my mother feared I would be beaten in the head by the police or other racists. She believed they always went for the head first.

My last year in high school, 1964, I was asked to “integrate” the schools. I refused and remained at my all Black high school and graduated fourth in my class of 104 students.

Then my life changed. I was awarded a full scholarship to Bryn
Mawr College, one of the “Seven Sisters” colleges, sisters to the “Ivy League.” My “brother” college was Princeton University, only forty-five minutes away. I went from all Black to nearly all White. After graduating from Bryn Mawr, getting married, and attending law school, I came home one summer and my mother and father informed me they were house hunting. We spent the greater part of my visit looking at houses in different parts of town. One day I went out on my own and followed a road I had never been on before. It ran into a large and beautiful lake. I found out its name was Lake Maggiore. There were two vacant lots on the lake for sale. I raced home and told my parents and little brother what I had found. We all drove over to the lots. My family was thrilled. My parents bought the lots.

My mother found a great builder, the Rutenberg brothers. She and Father, with their help, designed a beautiful house to be placed in the middle of the two lots. After completing the design, my parents went to many local banks to find construction financing. No bank would lend to them, a college professor and a public school teacher. They were as solid as a rock with great credit, but no bank would lend them the money to build the house in this neighborhood. Jim Crow was not dead.

Neither were my parents. They sat down with the builders, discussed the situation and the builders agreed to finance the construction for them.

Finally, this lovely home was finished and the entire family celebrated. Many, many years later, after both my parents were deceased, I moved in and renovated the house.

I have always loved the house. All of my brothers’ children and my daughter spent all their summers at the house. I knew what my parents were doing. I respect their wishes. I am now saving the house for all the grandchildren. I now know, it is our Homestead on Lake Maggiore. I hope it stays in the family for many more generations.

It is very peaceful here.
End of story. All true.
In the Legacy Garden
Sarah Kirstine Lain

Spreading my blanket in the struggle of dry blades among the green, I am at home here, an overpass above and a rose garden beneath. This plot teemed back in September with Dondu Dole and fruit-infused song, where I smiled and swayed to a woman in her dashiki, belting, Summertime, and the living is easy.

In summertime, Terri and I planned a protest reading, here in these gardens, and I remember her words: This is a sacred space. She inhaled, dreaming its July fronds covered in lights, a stage of poets, the folding chairs packed. Listeners here make a garden of resistance, where spider plants line the circular path, and a statue of a woman stares into her empty bowl.

Now, in the shadow of a velvet fern’s slump, I spread my blanket, cornbread in the air from Chief’s Creole Café, and run my palms along the bricks engraved with names. I think how home is the song of a stone-petaled fountain and cars zipping by. How space is a full measure of rest on the pistil of a closed magnolia that will sing its refrain, again, tomorrow.

For the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum, St. Petersburg, Fl.
Baby Bass
by Wendy Joan Biddlecombe

The baby bass jumps into my boat. I squeal, not because I fear the fish, but because he hopped into the boat and upset a ridiculously tranquil moment. Like, silently-floating-through-lily-pads-and-lotus-flowers-while-a-bald-eagle-soars-overhead kind of moment.

A minute or two earlier I rolled my eyes as the girls in the canoe next to ours shrieked and swatted a spider to death. Every wind-up and whack rocked the boat, and I was sure they’d end up in this shallow corner of Lake Maggoire, screaming even louder as they struggle to find their slimy footing.

But now, I’m a screamer, too.
I hear *Grab on to my oar!* and see one of my male colleagues coming to my unneeded rescue. For a split second I ignore his command in an attempt at feminist retaliation.

*Grab on!* he says, firmer this time, and I do as he says. He swiftly catches the fish using only the palm of his hand—sticking his thumb in the bass’ mouth and displaying for our group to see. Man dominates nature, and the class congratulates his valiant effort, remarking he doesn’t even need a pole or a net to catch a fish.

And as we paddle away and duck under an overpass filled with cobwebs, I mutter *I wasn’t afraid of the fish. I didn’t mean to scream.*
Driftwood

The entrance to the little Shangri-La declares in arched metal lettering, “Driftwood.” Black racers slither through thick ferns and bromeliads. Spanish moss drips like garland, catching peaks of twilight sun through the canopy. Bat houses are attached to the towering oaks, installed over the years to control mosquitoes. Night herons hunt on the coastlines of Big Bayou, leading out into Tampa Bay. Butterflies emerge from the lush green landscape, completing a fairy tale scene. Bound by Twenty-Fourth Avenue Southeast and Driftwood Road South, between Florida Avenue South and Beach Drive Southeast, Driftwood is one of the oldest settlements in the county.

Only forty-nine homes make up the neighborhood, most of which have been in the same families for generations. Houses rarely reach the market, selling almost wholly through word of mouth. Driftwood has a reputation for housing unconventional personalities: bohemians, artists, and academics. During Prohibition, Driftwood served as an outpost for smuggling booze. Amongst the many magnates-in-residence was Helen Gandy O’Brien, daughter of entrepreneur and bridge builder George S. “Gidge” Gandy Junior. Exclusive is an understatement when it comes to Driftwood. This place remains a secret garden that welcomes few to its precious real estate. Winding brick roads, which the city has begged to pave and widen, remain intact. The heavily laced tree canopy, which keeps Driftwood cool from the oppressive Florida heat, drives utility companies mad with tree trimming fervor.

Mordecai Walker, a ninety-three-year-old retired educator, never expected to live in Driftwood. He lived amongst the founding families he and his father worked tirelessly for in his early years. In the most densely populated county in Florida, Walker was able
to purchase his three-bedroom, three-bathroom for $67,000 in 1980. On nearly half an acre, Walker’s property is flush with mango and banana trees, the ground covered in carefully constructed gardens. Just steps from the Bay, his home is now valued at nearly $500,000. Born on the Fourth of July, 1924, he leads the neighborhood Independence Day parade every year. He’s proud of his country, his city, and all they’ve built together. This country and city did not make it easy for him though. And it was Walker’s own tireless education, discipline, and a little bit of good fortune that landed him in this paradise.

A Tree Grows In Sugar Hill
Steps from the driving hum of cars, over asphalt in downtown St. Petersburg, towers a lone avocado tree. Traffic flies down Interstate-275’s Fifth Avenue South exit ramp, hugging the concrete starkness of Tropicana Field, just feet from the tree’s current residence near Campbell Park. For more than half a century, this tree yields delicious and creamy fruit, year after year. It stands like a flag on the moon, and it might as well be considering how few know its story. To the passerby, it is just another tree in a city filled with avocado trees. Nearby, children playing on the jungle gym and practicing pee-wee football do not even take notice.

Mordecai Walker knows this tree’s story, because it is his story too. He planted the tree with his own hands in the 1950s. “That’s how I mark my spot,” said Walker. To be clear, these are “Florida avocados, not those small ones sold at the store.”

The trunk and branches that climb toward Florida’s sky are the sole remainder of the home Walker shared with his wife Anna and son Andrew for thirty years. Originally, the tree stood alongside the Walker’s 1940s four-bedroom and three-bath brick house at 1224 Fifth Avenue South. Then Interstate 275 came through Fifth Avenue South in the late 1970s, as interstates did across America at this time, demolishing everything in the name of eminent domain and progress. On the heels of the civil rights movement, the demolition of the Walkers’ St. Petersburg home exemplifies the institutionalized decimation of minority communities across the South.
Fifth Avenue South was dubbed “Sugar Hill,” because it housed St. Petersburg’s elite or middle-class black community. In the surrounding Gas Plant District and Methodist Town, the majority of black families lived at or below the poverty line. Deteriorating homes, most beyond repair, meant a need for relocation. Most, including the city’s NAACP chapter, agreed. The distinction of “blighted” meant families were entitled to a buy-out by the city. Walker’s home was hardly in shambles, however, he and others postponed repairs in anticipation of the Interstate and new homes elsewhere. The Interstate would arrive as promised, yet relocation remained an abstraction for many.

It was Walker’s education and economic status that emboldened him to be less patient with the process others were subjected to. He would not be stuck in the endless purgatory of bureaucracy. Insulted with the city’s initial offer on their family home, Walker became a real estate agent and negotiated a fair price plus an additional $15,000. His story remains distinct because he triumphed economically and culturally, becoming a middle class black man in the South. At the same time, Mordecai Walker’s story is universal. The racism he confronted daily and the loss of his family’s home and larger community speaks to the stories of many individuals and communities across the nation at that time.

**Walker’s Roots**

Mordecai Walker’s unlikely protest began in the classroom; he wanted to teach students about the land and how to make the soil yield food. This knowledge came from spending his childhood on farm in rural Hillsborough County. On this small, diversified farm the Walkers grew watermelons, corn, peas, okra and sugar cane. Just a few miles north of Tampa, Walker described his family’s farm as “country.” One of ten children, his father moved the family from Fort Benning, Georgia, to Florida in hopes of gaining work as a bellhop on Clearwater Beach. The bellhop gig lasted only one day before Walker’s father began clearing land to make way for the Gandy Bridge.

“Mr. Gandy was just starting to build the bridge then,” Walker said. What his Daddy helped build would eventually aid in connecting
I-275 and the Tampa bridges through Pinellas County to the Sunshine Skyway Bridge to the south. The bridge his father helped build would eventually connect to the roadways that destroyed Walker’s home decades later.

Walker recalls how Tampa’s founding families would stay at their weekend homes along Keystone Lake, “not far from his Daddy’s farm.” Walker and his family grew up mowing lawns for Howard Frankland and George Gandy. Returning home from college with a degree in agriculture and a desire to teach, those ties to powerful local figures became vital to establishing Walker’s career as an educator.

“Being a teacher was the best career a black person could have besides becoming a doctor or lawyer,” Mordecai avowed. He began teaching at an all-black school in Sun City. He remembers those students by the produce their towns were known for cultivating. There were the kids from Ruskin, or “tomatoes and goldfish.” Wimauma kids were from “the world’s largest gladiola producer.” And his students in Plant City, he referred to them as his “strawberry school.”

When Walker and his wife bought their house at 1224 Fifth Avenue South, all he knew about St. Petersburg was that “they had baseball.” The Walker family would come to learn that the color of their skin dictated that they could not sit on St. Petersburg’s infamous “green benches.” They could not use facilities at the beautiful Million Dollar pier. They could not go to Gulfport, except for work or special deliveries. Traveling by train through Largo, blacks were even told to close their windows to avoid being struck by stones thrown by white residents in the small farming community. To Walker, the most attractive and enticing place in St. Petersburg was Webb City. St. Petersburg’s crown jewel, Webb City was a downtown shopping center known for its tagline, “the world’s most unusual drug store.”

“There were groceries, clothing, furniture, even a nursery,” Walker said. Blacks in St. Petersburg were invited to shop, to purchase money orders, to spend their hard-earned dollars there. But Walker
and other blacks were not allowed to dine amongst whites. Walker recalls a twenty-five cent breakfast special that he always wanted but was never allowed to enjoy because of the color of his skin. Even consumerism had racial boundaries in St. Petersburg.

“They were happy to have us spend our money there,” he says. “But we were not allowed to have that twenty-five cent breakfast. It was a real nice looking breakfast.” Walker and his wife Anna came to St. Petersburg for sunshine, baseball, and Webb City. They were confronted with the racist nature of whites.

St. Petersburg preacher Enoch Davis recalled similar instances of racism throughout the city: “There were many places in St. Petersburg that blacks were not permitted to go. It was understood that blacks could not use the facilities of what was then called the Million Dollar Pier on the Bayfront. I made several trips to the Pier to speak over radio and television, but I was not allowed to go to the Pier for recreation. One occasion after I spoke over TV at the Pier, the St. Petersburg Times reported that a white woman had called to say she saw a black snake pass by the screen. After reading these words, I was more thoroughly convinced that I could not expect justice from the minds that were so poisoned by prejudice.”

Returning prejudice with grace, Walker became one of the founding members of the Ambassadors Club, an influential civic group for civil rights advocacy and leadership. Its members comprised some of the city’s most influential figures, mostly middle-class blacks with a goal to fight for civil rights through community funded projects. The Ambassadors Club established itself in 1954 with its inaugural participation in the Festival of States Parade, previously off limits to blacks. The club eventually funded St. Petersburg’s first black swimming pool at Wildwood. Still in operation today, Wildwood was the only place besides South Mole Beach that black residents could go swimming. The club also fostered milk and lunch programs for students. Walker served as president for five terms.

Dismantling racism in St. Petersburg was at a relative halt by the 1960s. The coming years would see a prolific push from black residents and civil rights activists to move sleepy St. Petersburg
along. But it was a slow, slow shift. By 1960, civil rights organizations like CORE and the NAACP had organized sit-ins at Webb City, Maas Brothers, and Woolworth’s on Central Avenue, and Walker was teaching at Sixteenth Street Middle School. Later, he would teach at Perkins Elementary when integration was raising tensions between whites and blacks in 1963.

Three years later, a young Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee member named Joe Waller tore down a mural at City Hall depicting grotesquely-styled black musicians serenading white partygoers. Waller ran through the streets of the city with the mural in hand, was arrested by police, and served over two years in prison for the incident. The episode prompted Joe Waller to change his name to Omali Yeshitela and he began a radical left wing group called the Uhuru Movement, led by his group known as the African People’s Socialist Party.

The wall that once held that mural in City Hall remains empty. The Florida Education Association held the first statewide strike in U.S. history in early 1967. It continued into the next year. Grappling with record attendance, teachers demanded better wages and funding to cope with the influx of students and work. The teacher’s strike came to John Hopkins, but Walker did not participate in what he called “the disruption.”

“I came here to teach,” Walker said.

As fellow educators protested in the street for equal pay and fair working conditions, Walker felt his place was in the classroom with his students. Four nights of riots ensued after a four-month strike by city sanitation workers demanding equal pay and treatment in 1968. Pinellas County began desegregation on a mass scale through busing in 1971. Violence ensued at Dixie Hollins High School and Boca Ciega High School, both located in historically segregated whites-only neighborhoods. Racial tensions in St. Petersburg remained high as the long delayed school integration creaked slowly forward.

**An Interstate Runs Through It**

In the case of Tampa Bay’s Interstate 275 and Interstate 4, low-
income areas obtained through land acquisitions were majority black neighborhoods. In the eyes of governing agencies, like the Florida Department of Transportation, this land was cheaper and its inhabitants less familiar with the bureaucracy of “urban renewal.” Originally slated to go through Pasadena, St. Petersburg’s black neighborhoods proved cheaper for routing I-275. Construction began in 1973. But the placement of the Interstate was cause for concern beyond the tearing down of family homes. Residents in midtown St. Petersburg were informed the Interstate would be arriving soon, cutting across the black community’s main thoroughfare, Twenty-Second Street South, and dead-ending multiple transportation arteries filled with businesses. Whole communities were going to be dissected while still alive, with the DOT tossing out whatever organs they decided blocked “progress.” It was made clear that this march toward progress had no regard for the loss or limbo of those that worked and resided in those neighborhoods.

Until 1954, it was illegal for blacks in St. Petersburg to live below Fifteenth Avenue South. After endless courtroom battles, the black community finally won the right to live there. Less than twenty years later, the community was informed that the street would be rendered utterly useless by the Interstate. The FDOT had designed the interstate in such a way that the avenue, a main artery in the black community, would simply dead end. And while residents, neighborhood associations, and civic groups had already conceded to the Interstate’s arrival, they had not signed on for a major shift in their neighborhood’s flow.

St. Petersburg’ Midtown residents awaited the conclusion off a 1975 environmental study. The NAACP was eventually forced to shift support for the project back to the environmentalists, who argued the Interstate was going to cause irreparable damage to the ecological system. Residents did not win their Fifteenth Avenue South battle, or countless other dead-ends created by I-275. To make matters worse, those expecting relocation funds from the FDOT were not allowed to move before construction began without risking the forfeit of such funds. The institutional echoes of Jim Crow became an often a deeper and more codified disrespect
through daily disenfranchisement. Looking upon a modern day map, there are just blank spaces where vibrant businesses and homes once resided, crushed under the foot of advancement at any cost.

**Epilogue**
The way Mordecai Walker sees it, everything worked out for his family. “Fifth Avenue South was too noisy for country folk like me and Anna anyway,” Walker said. “It wasn’t easy though, leaving that house.” By 1979, the fight for Fifteenth Avenue South was over and I-375 had opened, followed by I-175 in 1980, with I-275 becoming fully operational by 1981. By then, Walker and his family had moved into Driftwood’s utopia, their neighbors, relatives of the powerful white men he and his father worked for so many years ago. A piece of Walker remains in silent protest along the Interstate. He never meant to be the last man, or in this case, the last avocado tree standing. Walker and his tree did not simply survive adversity, they triumphed. The avocado tree still stands tall against the city’s continually shifting infrastructure, bringing a big grin to the face of the boy born on the Fourth of July.
I love cities. I came to love cities because I grew up on a farm, in a natural setting, surrounded by wild things in need of my attention. My childhood consisted of endless labor. My enemy: Nature. I loved cities at first because, from my youthful perspective, there was no nature there, and hence no work for me to do. Cities represented the first leisure landscape I had ever experienced. First there was Boston, which I visited every other weekend as a kid. Then there was New York City — the greatest city in the world. I remember the exhilaration I would feel seeing the skyline appear on the horizon, leaving the drudgery of weeds, and timber, and cattle, and chickens all behind me. Things were finished in cities. The work was done. I could sit back, rest, and enjoy, without worry. I knew I loved cities before I was ten years old and that feeling has never waned, although it has admittedly, been refined and better understood. I went to college in New York City and lived there for ten years,
during which time I became an “environmentalist” and was taught a different idea about cities.

I was taught that cities were wrong. They were Not Nature, anti-nature, too much humanity, that they were a lie. At first I resisted, because cities were my first love and I knew of rural landscapes and I still despised the work they represented. But, wilderness, I was told, purity, virgin, un-worked untouched places, held the highest value. Where no hand of man had sullied the peaceful harmonious progress of nature, there, I was told, one could find true value, truth.

During college, my visits home to the family farm increasingly included a leisurely jaunt in the woods, an effort to re-connect to this other something I had hated for the work it had made for me. And after a few years I followed this impulse even further, all the way to Missoula, Montana, to the heart of wilderness. My new friends there explained the purpose of places like the Rattlesnake Wilderness or the Bob Marshall, thousands of acres of mountain forest surrounding the college town. Here existed the last remnants of what the earth once was. I was taught guilt and shame and avoidance — do not stray from the path, do not leave an obvious campsite, do not harvest berries or wood or do anything to suggest your presence.

I purchased the necessary polypropylene clothing and aluminum backpack and white gas stove and discovered that the leisure I had sought in cities, was in fact available along the narrow trails of wilderness, the sublime vistas, the haunting empty quiet. I began to love wilderness. Nature shed of its necessary labor, left to its own devices, did not challenge me in the way the nature of my childhood farm had done. Here was a space where I could at last relax.

I began, in these same years, down a path that led to my professional development as an environmental scholar — an intellectual pursuit distinct from the political reactivity of environmentalism, but growing from its central concerns. And in this pursuit, I began to wonder how my love of wilderness might fit
into the larger movement of humanity. As a humanist, I was taught that humanity’s greatest gifts to itself and its presence on earth included justice and that our best works always promoted this ideal and that our worst tendencies always ignored or resisted the same.

I asked one of my most ardent wilderness-loving friends about questions of justice, one day, mentioning the kinds of human challenges found in cities around the world. She told me that the best thing that could happen for the Earth was for places like New York City to be wiped from the planet. “Should the 12 million people who live there be moved out here to Missoula?” I asked. “They should die along with the city,” she replied.

And there it was, in one simple phrase, the logical conclusions of the wilderness ideal. Not, as John Muir had once claimed, to bring us closer to god and equality and reverence for all things, but to kill the urbanites. The wilderness ideal led its adherent to thoughts of genocide and death, a kind of casual misanthropy.

My first reaction to such inhumanity was to love cities even more. To recognize the powerful humanizing impacts of being piled one atop another, forced through the sheer limits of space, into closeness — forced, by the sheer necessity of society, to hold at least a grudging respect for everyone.

Too much space, I’ve come to conclude, makes people selfish, forgetful, inhumane, and foolish. If you don’t believe me, just notice the trajectory of the culture of the United States in the nineteenth century when land purchases and warfare gave us space beyond our wildest dreams. But I’ve also come to realize something more. The problem is not in the purity or brokenness of one landscape or another. Neither the city nor wilderness are pure places, because life itself is messy and tangled.

The problem stems from that longing for leisure, for space unsullied by work and the delusional belief that it can be found or produced somewhere without consequence.

Leisure is an ideal that animates our drive for technology — as soon as we get the robots to build robots (right?) all of us can sit...
back and rest. It animates our love of the automobile, the computer, the smart phone. It even animates our recent counter-cultural movements. The children of the sixties were just looking to drop out, to live a life of permanent leisure. Wilderness fanatics are seeking the same ideal. And, curiously, even the permacultural movement in local agriculture, desires above all, a food-production landscape that takes care of itself.

But when we crave leisure and imagine spaces without work, we place ourselves in denial; we fail to recognize where we live and how we live and what we need to do if we want that greatest human gift of all, justice. Justice for each of us and justice for this wild living other that surrounds and embeds and embodies us. Let’s use Boyd Hill as a touchstone, this wild space amidst urbanity is emblematic. Here we stand in an apparent wilderness, in nature. On one side we have a serpentine golf course development, the capitalist expression of the pastoral ideal, a landscape that hides its work to satisfy leisure. On the other side we have Lake Maggiore, named in Italian by its creators to evoke the leisurely Italian countryside, a man-made lake created atop an estuary by damming it outlets.

And let’s think about how much effort and energy are enlisted to keep the “nature” aesthetic alive in this place. The fossil fuels expended to dredge the reeds that fill the lake’s edges and ruin its view. The human labor, the small staff and large number of volunteers who tear and pull at potato vine, week after week, year after year. The long leaf pine pups, sprouted elsewhere, driven here, and planted by humans. The Garlon 4, an herbicide, used to spray Brazilian Pepper and other “invasive” plants that would sully this nature if given the chance. So much energy, so much work. There is no leisure, and the illusions of leisure that many of us of privilege both seek and appear to experience have caused us to live somewhat blindly atop the labor of others as if it and they did not exist.

Think of all of us. Someone planted and processed and delivered the food we ate today, as someone has done all of our lives; someone mined the minerals forged into the computer that helped
us publish this book. Someone refined and delivered the gasoline that ran the car that someone else made for us. Someone grew our cotton, assembled our electrical grid, paved our roads, processed our water, sewed together our clothing. We visit Boyd Hill today: a beautiful space, made possible by work and labor and construction and ideas, built by humans with the stuff of nature. No one can ever transcend the need for work; we can pretend it’s not there and by pretending, we forget ourselves as part of our community.

In a two-mile radius from the nature preserve, there exists a human crisis of national significance. More boys do not finish school than in all but ten other places in the nation. More diet-related diseases — diabetes, obesity, infant death — than in all but ten other cities. Twenty-five percent of the entire population in the three zip codes surrounding and including Boyd Hill live below the poverty line and almost fifty percent of the kids. St. Petersburg and Boyd Hill were built by human labor, by the labor of blacks who had been long freed from slavery and wanted to begin new lives as citizens in this country — a dream yet fully complete. They laid the bricks and sewer lines and built the dams and sidewalks and created the space out of which this little gem has been constructed. Most of us whites are from elsewhere, but the children and grandchildren of the blacks whose labor built this town remain part of our community and they are suffering the worst of all. And when we forget labor and people and we crave leisure and escape and we believe it is to be found in artifices like this nature preserve, we let that injustice occur right under our noses as if it has nothing to do with us and this space.

That cannot be the purpose of wilderness or nature. It cannot. I now love cities because I realize how they force us to remember. There is nothing but nature in cities, and nothing but cities in places like this little “nature” preserve we call Boyd Hill. And what links all of these places is work, labor, that thing I sought to escape first in cities and then in wilderness. And what shapes work and labor are social relationships whose structure reflects a presence or absence of justice.

The work of humans and nature is everywhere, and it’s the only thing we have.
Until we come to realize this indelible fact of modern life, until we stop the denials and resist escape and confront hybridity and the genuine conditions that bind humans and nature together in this earthly home of ours, we will not achieve the justice we all seek — the human justice yet fulfilled, and the just use of nature that we all, in our heart of hearts, truly desire.
I am just not a water boy, never have been, and never will. I am what Popeye the Sailor would call a landlubber. What a great word. I thought the word might be some corruption of land-lover, which would be a positive thing. I don’t hate the water. I just love the land. But no such luck. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “lubber” as a clumsy person; an inexperienced sailor. The word derives from the Middle English word meaning “lazy lout.”

That’s me.

What is strange is that I have always lived near big bodies of water: in Manhattan, on Long Island, in Rhode Island (the Ocean State), and here in St. Petersburg. Water, water everywhere, but not a drink to drop!

The closest I ever came to waterphilia was when my three daughters were children. They grew up within walking distance of Pinellas Point and often encouraged me to escort them and the family dog to the very tip of the point at the southern end of Fourteenth Street, one of the so-called “pink streets.”

There’s a little park there, with a fine view of the seascape where the Gulf meets the Bay. The surface is muddy, a kind of paradise for hermit crabs and seabirds who love to feast on them. My daughters loved to watch the crabs creep out of their holes. A quick gesture by a daughter would make all the crabs disappear at once.

This ritual led to a renaming of the territory. “Can we go down to the Crab Holes?” Lauren would ask. And off we would go.

On one trip, we found the holes covered with sea water. We stood on a concrete ledge to get a better view. A surprising and, to me, horrid sight floated before us. An ugly line of horseshoe crabs, like a Panzer division, had taken over our territory. (As a kid I once stepped on a horseshoe crab at Bar Beach on the North Shore of Long Island and retained an irrational fear.)
“Are they mating, Daddy?” said one of the girls. I took a look.
“Maybe they are,” I said, shoeless and clueless.

The next day I wrote a poem, a haiku. It went like this:

    Captured on the shore,
    Chorus lines of horseshoe crabs
    Unlucky in love.

I sent it to poet Peter Meinke, now Florida’s poet laureate, for his approval. He wrote back: “Hmm. A haiku with a kicker.”

This poem was never published — until one day I sent it to my 8,000 Twitter followers.

The moral of the story: Even if you don’t get water, it will one day get you.
If you live along a two-block stretch of East Harbor Drive between Seventh and Ninth Streets South you always “get wind” of a drop in the water level of a nearby drainage ditch, before anyone else.

The reason is that the breeze will bring an odor reminiscent of a badly-operating sewer plant as the garbage and muck in the ditch is uncovered, and heated by the summer sun.

“When it’s low you really smell it,” one resident of the area said. “It’s especially bad if the wind and tide are right. It’s not too bad now, but just let the sun bake it for a while.”

Adding to the odor problem is the trash which people, undoubtedly from outside the neighborhood, keep dumping onto the ditch at night.

Among the items dumped in are beer and soda pop cans and bottles, food, old pillows, an old chair, and occasionally a dead dog.

Despite these unsavory items, neighborhood children still find the ditch an irresistible temptation, and play along its edges and often wind up falling in.

One family, whose youngest child is three years old, said the child “is always falling in. He hasn’t gotten hurt, but he really stinks” and is covered with slime.

There is no fencing of any kind along the ditch, which when empty is about four to five feet deep.

“The kids go walking around in it, and it’s a wonder they don’t get disease from it,” a man said. He pointed out a broken concrete post uncovered by the water, and said, “when that thing gets covered by the water, there’s nothing to stop a kid from jumping, or dropping in and hitting it. They could be killed.”
Emil Hicks, Acting Director of the St. Petersburg Pollution Control Department, admitted the problems exist, but said there simply isn’t too much the city can do about them.

“The best I can determine is that we have a tidal condition. When there’s a low tide there’s an odor.”

The ditch, or drainage area, draws off excess water from Lake Maggiore and a system including Bartlett Lake and Salt Creek, Hicks said. Thus the water level in the ditch rises and drops according to the overall water level in the area.

“The more I think about it,” Hicks concluded, “the more confused I get. It’s difficult to control tidal conditions. I don’t know what we could do about it.”

Hicks also confirmed the complaints of residents about garbage thrown into the ditch.

“It’s not just this particular area. Look at any drainage area in the city and you can find trash cans. You just get sick looking at the trash in these places. I can’t understand the kind of people who would do things like that.”

This problem, however, Hicks thinks can be handled. “I’m tinkering with the idea right now of putting up signs against pollution.”

He said there is a specific city statute making it illegal to dump “garbage or trash ... into a drainage area or waterway.”

The effect of the sign, he said, would be, hopefully, “to make people think before they throw trash in the water.”

This is about as far as the city can go, he said, commenting that any plan to put extra surveillance over this area is impractical. But, “I’ve been hoping that if I ever caught anybody throwing trash into the water I could have them arrested by the police.”
Concerning the problem of children playing near the ditch, Hicks said that here too any possible city action would be so extensive as to be impractical.

“There’s a limit to how much control over the area you could have. To post it against children you’d have to put up fencing back to the lake.”

The Evening Independent
July 16, 1971
(courtesy, Times Publishing Company)
Mini-lights, Mini-lights, Come out Tonight

by Eric Vaughan

St. Petersburg residents have fearfully uttered this phrase for decades while crossing the unsteady Booker Creek Bridge on Ninth Street South. Rumor has it that if you say “Mini-lights, Mini-lights come out tonight” three times while on the bridge, two “mini” green men will come out and chase you. They are believed to be brothers who fled the circus and now reside under the bridge. The rumors have terrorized Southside citizens for over a half century. The green men, also called midgets or midget lights, are believed to be escapees from a traveling circus from the 1950s or 1960s. The brothers were part of a freak show that toured the country. When the freak show arrived in St. Petersburg the two brothers saw the opportunity to escape the torturous conditions of the circus. One night, as the circus lights faded and the other freaks went to bed, the two green brothers made their escape. They eventually found a woman in South St. Petersburg friendly enough to take them in. She went by “Mamie.”

Many versions of the Mini-lights story involve Mamie. In fact, in a lot of accounts, the brothers are known as “The Mamie Lights.” Mamie is often portrayed as a maternal figure, overprotective of the two brothers. There is a good chance that if you go around Booker Creek yelling for the Mini-lights you will instead meet the wrath of Mamie. Mamie has been known to run after intruders with a baseball bat in hand and chase you off.

Avoiding the mini-lights may be more difficult than one could expect. The location of the two brothers and their protectant Mamie changes, depending on the teller and when the story is being told. Different versions move the mini-lights from location to location, all on the Southside of St. Petersburg. In some versions they live under the Booker Creek Bridge, in other accounts they are in tent under Thrill Hill, and most notably, they have been found in a small home on Thirty-Fourth Street, where Mamie also resides. Some people believe they live by the water to bathe and catch their food, while others believe the stories set the location near dangerous places to warn young children away from these locations.
In one of the original versions, the mini-lights are tucked away in a shack just south of St. Pete High. In the late seventies a few boys from the varsity basketball team decided they would test their luck and pay the mini-lights a visit. They went outside of Mamie’s house and screamed, “Mini-lights, Mini-lights come out tonight, Mini-lights, Mini-lights come out tonight, Mini-lights, Mini-lights come out to ....” Before they could finish their call, they heard a rustling the bushes next to them. Three out of the four boys took off running; the other boy, the captain of the basketball team, was caught by the mini-lights and thrown on top of the roof of the house. While he never actually saw the two brothers, he knew it was them that put him on the roof. He lived to tell the story, but he never returned to that house again.
Clam Bayou, a tidal estuary dividing Gulfport’s “anything goes” lifestyle and St. Petersburg’s ordered suburbs, lacks the forests of the swamp, but the muck and the mangroves mire me in untamed Florida all the same. When the voices in my head start to crowd out rational thought, I throw my kayak atop my car and head to our own local swamp. On most days, I will pass at least one other kayaker, but the bayou is filled with mangrove tunnels and twists and turns, and all too easily I can escape the living and pretend, just for an hour, that I am alone.

It was on one such paddle that I spied the crown of a bright yellow motorbike helmet, trapped in a cage of stained red mangrove roots.

My breath catches; my heart races, and I feel just a touch of breakfast roll in my stomach. I cannot see the face mask, and the murky bottom fogs the water and anything else, such as, oh, an arm, that may have found its way to the swamp with the helmet. I paddle closer, then
stop and stare at the helmet, trying to convince myself that, after all, it’s just a discarded helmet. Gingerly, I prod the helmet with my paddle, trying to knock it loose so it can bob harmlessly free and prove to my trepidation unfounded. The helmet remains comfortably ensconced in its mangrove jail. I poke harder, and steeling myself for whatever horrors the crabs had done to the poor soul lucky enough to meet his end near the bayou.

Of course, in all honesty, I would love to find a body in Clam Bayou. Some paddlers see gators in every felled log and snakes on every twig, but me? I see dead people.

If Florida novelist Carl Hiaasen is to be believed, every patch of swamp in the Sunshine State contains at least one decaying body awaiting discovery. That makes sense; if I were to kill someone — or, more probably, if someone were to kill me — the Everglades is the place to head with the still-warm body. Florida’s palustrine and riverine wilderness is the perfect place to stash a body: weigh it down enough, find a patch of land not often visited, and the muck, wildlife, and humidity will do a fine job of covering your tracks in short order. That’s part of Florida’s magic: it is at the very core of the “man against nature” battle we see in some of literature’s most treasured works. Except it is not the literature we recall from our high school English classes, the kind of “literature” that, in your head, you always hear said with a snobby British accent and a capital “L.” This is the literature of Florida’s outback and, in the case of pockets of wilderness like Clam Bayou, Florida’s “near back.” The swamp is a pulsing, breathing, squiggling entity of life and, just as often, death, and while some come to Florida with hopes of finding paradise, I always keep one eye open for dead people.

Let me stop here and explain. I am no murderer, and actually, I probably wouldn’t handle finding a dead body well at all. But I do believe much of the mythology pulp fiction would have us believe about Florida: we have lots of people in the Sunshine State, many from somewhere else, and some of those people didn’t come here for the white sand beaches and excellent sport fishing. Running away to paradise, apparently, isn’t just for people who are escaping a boring career but also for those escaping far more serious things.
It seems, though, that you can run from your past but you cannot escape your nature, so often these bad people do bad things here, too. I believe, just as much as I believe in the moon’s effect on the tides or the first law of thermodynamics, that if you poke at the state’s untamed edges long enough, you will, one day, find a clump of hair attached to a corpse.

I do not pretend to find these desires anything nobler than macabre. What proper lady wishes to find a dead body, much less one almost literally in her backyard? Clearly, I am no proper lady. I am, however, an absurd kind of pantheist. I find proof of the Universe’s divinity when surrounded by the wildness of nature, which — and this is the “absurd” part — is why I want to find a dead body in Clam Bayou.

Stick with me. For someone to regard this estuary — it neither contains clams nor is it, by definition, a bayou — as worthy of swallowing a person would mean the estuary had finally earned its place alongside the rest of wild Florida.

We crave wilderness and expect it as we chase the braids of water slipping into the Everglades, or in the unplumbed blue of a spring, but Florida’s true wilderness — the wilderness we can all touch — lies much closer to home. These feral pockets of Florida, the Salt Creeks and the Clam Bayous, are not the vast, untamed expanse of the Ten Thousand Islands or our national forests. They are undervalued, overtaxed, and fettered with signs of humanity’s inhumanity to nature. Florida’s forgotten wilderness juxtaposes with townhomes, billboards, and pavement. We discount and devalue them with words spoken in sneers, talking of a “bay beach” or an “impaired waterway.” We do not count them as gems to be treasured, but failures to be mourned. To quote Rodney Dangerfield, they get no respect.

This particular politically charged mosaic of flotsam, jetsam, herons, and crabs has seen better days. It has also seen worse ones. You will not find the elusive ghost orchid here, but step deep enough through the mangroves and you will find a perfectly preserved record of snack food wrappers from 1998 through the present day.
Forget the Cheetos wrappers and plastic bottles in the settling pond, and Clam Bayou is a twist of mangroves, muck, and magic. The pull of my paddle as it makes tiny eddies in the water, the slurp of the muck as it swallows my feet at the put-in, the scrape of the oysters along my kayak’s lime-tinted hull: all these things spin the spell of the swamp. Man exists with wilderness, and wilderness exists in spite of man.

This wilderness has, to put it delicately, issues. Part Gulfport, part St. Petersburg, part Florida, and many parts private property equal the makings for an environmental and political disaster. Humans put a lot of pressure on Clam Bayou to filter contaminants like car oil, fertilizer, and pesticides out of the water before it meandered out to Boca Ciega Bay.

Those things remain unseen, and had it been only for those additions to the herons, mullet, and crabs, Clam Bayou might still appear untouched. But add to that shopping carts, potato chip bags, and an almost-archival collection of fast-food cola cups, and the neighbors start to get vocal at city council meetings. At these reality-TV shows in the making that pass for local government, these people do not call Clam Bayou wilderness. Clam Bayou, they sneer, is no Everglades. It is damaged, impaired, ruined. No one calls it “savage” or “primitive” or “untamed.”

It may lack the sawgrass prairie of the Everglades or Manatee Springs’ emerald-tinged cobalt depths, but the crabs and the muck and the fish in Clam Bayou will reclaim a body just as quickly. People don’t decompose quickly on city streets; it is in the heart of Florida, in her swamps and muck ponds, where the real energy of life returns to the world.

As for that helmet?

Finally, with a great, giant sucking noise, it breaks free from the trees and the bog and reveals no head with no body or body parts attached. I sigh and pull it onto my kayak to throw out when I return to shore. One day, my suburban wilderness will be taken seriously enough to claim a body.
Wild Salt Creek
by Ariel Ringo

Taking the corner like an Indy 500 racer, Cathy whipped into the makeshift parking spot and jumped out of her car, already apologizing. We had been waiting on her to arrive, our very own Clam Bayou tour guide. Introductions were said. Life vests were put on. Cathy quickly unhooked her single passenger kayak from the roof of her small car and slipped it into the mouth of the inlet. On our tour she took us around the hidden trails of Clam Bayou and brought us to an area where the city had dammed up part of the water so that it wouldn’t affect the traffic on — what I am pretty sure is — Twenty-Second Avenue South.

Weaving in and out of the legs of the mangroves, Cathy had her camera close by and would take snapshots of the scenery. Between shots of the ibis and the bayou she told us a story of how she always hoped to see a dead body along the water.

A dead body is not something I would want to find, paddling through the swamp on a Friday afternoon. But Cathy explained that if a cadaver were found, people would start to take notice.

This area is a lot like Cathy, a little rough around the edges, intimidating, and even a bit wild. Both these waters and Cathy have a purpose: to bring attention back to this body of water. Hope for the wilderness has not been completely lost. Even though some may only see it as a garbage pit, trash on the banks at least means there are people actively coming down. The beer bottles and old styrofoam cups are part of the charm.

At first glance, the waterway does not look like it can be successfully navigated. But look harder. Salt Creek goes from Bayboro Harbor to Clam Bayou. A good portion of the creek can be paddled, depending on the tide. When I had gone through Salt Creek the first time, we loaded into our canoes at Bayboro Harbor, then headed south. We passed Fish Tales; I could smell the fried food and see the people having ice-cold beers on the deck. If only I could have a beer while
doing this. Clearly I would have to come back and canoe Salt Creek again, but next time with proper provisions.

Along the side are fishermen bringing in their daily catch. The banks have lush mangroves, with beer cans for decoration. Some lucky groves have old grocery bags tangled in the hair of their branches. Paddling on, the fishermen and marinas fade; it’s just the creek and her used accessories.

The further one goes, the harder it becomes to continue. The branches are too thick to get across, and cutting down the mangroves are not always part of the option.

If this creek were in a different part of town, there would have been a board meeting by now: people bringing the creeks “issues” to light, the creek is unsafe for their children to play around, or the degradation decreasing property value ... the mangroves growing too wild, I can’t see the water from my back yard.

But moving the creek is not going to happen, so how can we get the motivation and awareness to help clean it up?

Or is this dingy creek fine the way it is?

There is no doubt that Salt Creek has its own charm about it. I think part of that charm is the influence that South St. Pete has imposed on it. If this creek were in a wealthier neighborhood it would more than likely become just another cookie cutter canoe trail. There would be no adventure in going through the waterways. As it stands, the creek has its own voice, from the many characters that ride their makeshift boats down it, to the socioeconomic graph left by beer cans.

Landscape designer Anne Whiston Spirn might agree with me. It’s about the water and keeping it protected, without changing it all together. In her essay “Restoring Mill Creek: Landscape Literacy, Environmental Justice and City Planning and Design,” she writes, “To read landscape is also to anticipate the possible, to envision, choose and shape the future: to see, for example, the connections between buried, sewered stream, vacant land and polluted river, and to imagine rebuilding a community while purifying its water.”
The community has been built around Salt Creek. Raise awareness in the community and that will have a direct effect on the waterway. There is no need for large cleanup crews and state legislators to come in and try to set projects into motion. Let the community take care of the creek. People had originally set up homes around it so they could use it as a source to get food, now I don’t think anyone would really eat out of Salt Creek. But that same thought, that same notion of wanting to live from the water needs to take place.

If finding a dead body in this waterway is what it is going to take to get Salt Creek on the map, I’m not sure I want Cathy to ever find one. Let’s keep Salt Creek for ourselves. Keep Salt Creek for the community. The people who enjoy it now for how it is, there are no reasons to change the way it looks. Cut back the mangroves, give it a trim. No. Pick up the trash sparkling in the water like sea wreckage. Yes. That we can do. We need to leave this water system the way it is intended to be experienced. Embrace Salt Creek for everything that it is, and everything that it isn’t. I don’t want a big dredge coming through pulling back the mangroves, and making enough room so that a small-motorized boat could get through. There is no fun, no adventure in that creek. Leave me with the creek that is there now — the creek that, if I fell into the water, might lead me to get a tetanus shot.
Thirteen Ways of Looking at Nature in the City

by Daniel Spoth

For over a decade, my poetry students have been perplexed by Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Their reactions range from confusion to frustration to irritation to anger, usually in that order. Unlike the familiar, ordered metric stanzas or orderly free-verse meditations on love, life, and death that they’re used to, Stevens’ poem offers a seemingly disconnected sequence of brief, imagistic sketches of blackbirds in a variety of contexts — from the “twenty snowy mountains” of the first stanza to the cedar-limbs of the thirteenth. Lacking a consistent narrative voice or stated philosophical argument, the poem ranges freely over several tonal registers, from the idiomatic folksiness of the second stanza (“I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds”) to cryptic commentaries on poetics in the tenth (“At the sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light, / Even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply”). In short, it’s not the most accessible poem, especially for undergraduates only casually interested in poetic history at best, and I find my students...
frequently more willing to simply dismiss or abandon the piece as hopelessly obscure rather than engaging with it on its own terms.

When I first moved to St. Pete a little less than five years ago, I would describe my own reaction in the same terms. It struck me as a city innocent of even the basic principles of urban planning rapidly sinking into the sea, populated by a ragtag assortment of beach bums, robber barons, barnaculur fishermen, grizzled plumbers with shaky hands and suspicious stains all over their skin, miscellaneous maniacs, and an assortment of wildlife that invariably wanted to either eat you or crawl all over you while you slept, and, in some occasions, first the latter and then the former. I remember driving down Thirty-Fourth Street, past the bewildering array of gentlemen’s clubs and tire repair places, only thin car windows separating me from the air that felt like what would happen if you dumped a swamp onto a volcano, dimly aware that I hadn’t seen a hill more than a foot high since I had come here, and thought: really? This is where I’m spending the foreseeable (and, if the tenuring process didn’t simply kick me back into the cabbage patch immediately, unforeseeable) future? In short, at first I couldn’t make sense of the place. Like a poem, the first time you encounter it, you get only part of the picture, a twinge maybe, a vague sense of like or dislike.

One of the sticking points for my students when reading Stevens’ poem is his deliberate designation of “thirteen ways” of viewing his titular bird: why thirteen ways? Why not fourteen? Why not sixty? Yet the titling is, if nothing else, deliberate; it reads “Thirteen Ways,” not “The Only Thirteen Ways,” or “All Possible Ways” of looking at a blackbird. I tell them to abandon notions of plot arcs and character growth that they may have learned from the study of fiction — could not the last stanza (“It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow. / The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs”) be just as easily the first? Are we not encouraged, as readers, to produce a variety of interpretations rather than one “correct” reading? Gradually, my students come around to the notion that they can, in fact, look at the bird in ways not dictated by the poem.
The east side of Eckerd’s campus fronts onto a water treatment plant. I call it a water treatment plant because it sounds slightly less offensive than “giant holding tanks filled with human feces and acerbic compounds.” At intervals based on the direction of the wind, the water treatment work clock, the frequency of toilet flushes in St. Pete, or any or none of the above, the breeze will gently waft across the athletic fields, through the live oaks, and make the entire east side of campus smell like something ... that similes fail to capture. One morning, I remember exiting my car in preparation for another day in the salt mines to be arrested by the sight of an enormous flock of ibises, some in full adult snowy-white plumage, some mottled by youth, combing steadily through the grass on the fields adjoining the plant. The birds were presided over by three slender egrets. A heavy mist lay immediately over the field, but above it the sun was shining, bathing everything in soft light. In a landscape — or a poem — wholly foreign to you, what at first seemed opaque becomes suffused with possibility — if nothing is understood, then all meanings are possible.

Frustration gives way to dawning realization and, one hopes, a view of the poem, or the world, that’s a bit more flexible than before. Notice how the circularity of motion in the third stanza leads to the emphasis on natural cycles in the ninth. See how flexibility in the beginning of the poem becomes fixity by the end. No part of this poem is unnecessary, I tell my students, and no part is put in the wrong place. The poem is a system like any other, a machine for generating meaning, and, as with a real machine, if you remove an essential part it’ll cease to function. If you take it apart (I realize as a byproduct of many failed attempts to fix clocks, stereos, laptops, cars, and occasionally nuclear reactors), you run the risk of not being able to find all of the pieces again or reassemble them in a way that makes the machine work.

I remember watching a group of seven wood storks, a species whose habitat has been so diminished that Florida is the only space on the continent where it remains, huddle in a drainage ditch amidst trash while cars passed at fifty-five miles an hour a few feet away. I remember watching devil rays and dolphins play
in the waters off Pass-A-Grille Beach at sunset while, a few hundred yards away, a drunken wedding party popped champagne corks and threw their Solo cups in the sand.

Nature is a system like any other, a machine for generating meaning, and, as with a real machine, if you remove an essential part it’ll cease to function. If you take it apart, you run the risk of not being able to find all of the pieces again or reassemble them in a way that makes the machine work. Is it unreasonable to assume, to hope, that learning to look in a different way at a poem can cause us to learn to look in a different way at the world around us? That discovering the way that language works can lead to discovering the way that nature works? It’s a question worth asking and maybe even worth answering.
Everything in nature is constantly in motion. Nature stops for no one, and nowhere is that more evident than on a sailboat. We set out on a two day sail from Bayboro Harbor to understand more about the natural world and our place in it. During our sailing trip, I learned many things that set me off balance from the illusion of our perfectly horizontal world. From the rocking of a ship on the ocean swells, to the sporadic and playful movements of our native dolphins, I was able to see the world in a way I hadn’t previously been able to.

David Gessner states in *The Tarball Chronicles* that the “world is on the move and so we build things with straight lines.” I understood more clearly what he meant while standing on the rocking deck of our sailboat, *Boogans*, as I repeatedly tripped over a cleat or step whenever the boat dipped into the wave troughs. I spent as much of the trip as I could sitting, and left with many bruises on my ankles and shins, but I was also able to better appreciate the constant movement that keeps our planet going.

I sat with our captain, Garrett, on the starboard side of our boat, discussing different aspects of sailing. I hadn’t really gone sailing before, though it was something I had always wanted to try. He was explaining the method of turning into the wind in order to change the sails, since otherwise the sails are so taut that it’s impossible to do anything with them. I came to understand in this moment just how much we were at the mercy of the wind and waves, only able to make a movement when the elements allowed. Moving in a straight line is nearly impossible on a sailboat, as you are forced to turn in whichever direction the wind is going, unless you want to putt along with the engine at a snail’s pace. I glanced in some wonder at the sails above us, appreciating more their impact and the speed at which we were able to move. Though sails themselves are comprised of straight lines, they operate most efficiently when filled with the Gulf sea breeze. While I was admiring the neatness of our craft, Garrett was explaining the impact that the ocean really has on a sailboat.
Boogans had left dry-dock immediately before our trip, after having her keel and some other small things repaired. Garrett was explaining just how detrimental salt water is to anything humans try to place in it. “You want to rot wood? Salt water. You want to break concrete? Put it in salt water. Salt water destroys everything,” he said, smiling ruefully as he gazed ahead to gauge the direction of our companion boat, Wanderer. When he said this, I was able to contextualize what Gessner was saying about the groins and sea walls that are placed to stop the movement of the shoreline, and the minimal effect that they have in preventing it. In fact, these manmade inventions usually just cause more problems in the long run. The humongous expense to maintain them, on top of the long term damage to our shoreline, creates compounding problems that we eventually won’t be able to fix.

The trip booted me quite far from my comfort zone, and I couldn’t help but enjoy the lack of organization present on the waves. The leaning keel of a sailboat, the constant change of direction in order to keep at an angle to the wind, all of these things left me mesmerized. Even though I left with a massive sunburn and quite a few bruises, I also gained a new perspective on nature’s impact and just how little we humans truly understand her.
A few years ago, driving across Corey Causeway from South Pasadena to St. Pete Beach, I started to share a story from my youth when my younger son, a stand-up comic who has never been at a loss for words, asked one of his show-stopping questions.

“Hey Dad,” he said, “is this the ‘is’ tour, or the ‘used-to-be’ tour?”

When our laughter subsided I was forced to admit that it was definitely part of the used-to-be tour.

The story I was about to tell was from a night back in the early 1960s, when an intoxicated bridge tender forgot to lower the barricades before he opened the drawbridge. Two drivers were approaching. One driver, coming from the beach side, hit the brakes and his car skidded up the opening bridge and then down into the dark waters of Boca Ciega Bay. The other driver, the mother of one my high school friends, a middle-aged woman who was the chain-smoking widow of a World War II veteran, did the opposite. She hit her accelerator. Her car jumped the gap, blowing all four tires as it landed safely on the far side of the bridge.

As I grow older, I find myself remembering how things used to be, recalling interesting stories from the past, tales I enjoy telling. I guess it is a belief that there are some incidents in life which should not be forgotten. And, with a surname like McMullen, it is especially difficult not to care about the history of Pinellas County. After all, it has been 175 years since the first McMullen arrived. In 1841 James Parramore McMullen, better known as Capt. Jim, came south from Georgia for his health, the first of seven brothers who would settle in the north end of the county.

Today, we can only imagine the unspoiled beauty he found in a place almost totally untouched by settlers of European ancestry. Florida was a new frontier in an American territory, not yet a state. Pinellas County was a sandy wilderness of pine trees and palmettos, populated by water moccasins, snapping turtles and alligators. The sky was filled with pelicans, gulls and other exotic birds. All were creatures dependent upon the waters that surrounded and
interlaced our peninsula, unique bodies of water that have always made this area special.

Along the gulf, unspoiled barrier islands protected a coastline of mangroves teeming with life. Heron and fiddler crabs roamed the shoreline, finding substance in the muddy water. There was a seemingly inexhaustible assortment of fish swimming in the creeks, bays, and gulf. It was an unspoiled world swarming with life, existing much as it had for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years.

Today we can only whet our appetite with a few reminders of what life was once like before the developers and community boosters began to reshape Pinellas County into the most densely populated county in Florida, a state that has grown at a breakneck pace for more than half a century.

If Capt. Jim were still around to take us on his used-to-be tour, he might guide us to the few places that still provide brief glimpses of what his world was like, places like the Weedon Island and Brooker Creek Preserves, Fort De Soto Park, Heritage Village and the Florida Botanical Gardens. These are places where one can still walk on undeveloped beaches, canoe through mangrove wetlands and explore the natural resources of that past world, seeing it the way Native Americans once experienced it long before our ancestors arrived. It is even possible to visit Capt. Jim's home, a pioneer cabin thought to be the oldest residential structure surviving in the county, relocated along with other relics of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries to Heritage Village in Largo. Sadly, these places now take on a surreal appearance in our world of crowded beaches, high-rise condominiums, gated communities, strip shopping centers and congested roadways.

Crossing Corey Causeway, as I did that afternoon with my family on the used-to-be tour, often brings back other, more personal memories. Looking to the left I can see an island in Boca Ciega Bay where I once lived. Dredged from the bottom of the bay and surrounded by a concrete seawall, it is one of numerous manmade islands that litter the modern Florida coastline.
Looking to the right, at the landfill islands upon which the causeway is now built, there is a line of high-rise buildings. In my teenage years, those islands were just being shaped. There was no bridge connecting them to the mainland, no seawall to hold the land in place. If there had once been mangroves, they were gone. The only vegetation was untamed grass and scrub bushes. They felt very much like desert islands. The only way to reach those islands back then was by swimming across the small channels or by boat.

My own attachment to the waters of Boca Ciega Bay was born back then. Some days my friends and I would take a little daysailer to the islands. Other times we would simply swim. We lived our summers and weekends in bathing suits or cut-off jeans. Our young skin seemed to be perpetually pink, flaking off our shoulders from too much sun. For us it was a mid-Twentieth Century life akin to the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Jim rafting down the Mississippi.

Like my son, most people have little interest in the used-to-be tour. They are busy enjoying today. What they do not understand is that thirty or forty years from now they will be confronted with their own used-to-be tour. They will find themselves in a world that has changed as dramatically as the world of Capt. Jim has transformed into the world of today. The things they take for granted today will be gone, too quickly becoming relics of the past.

As the keeper of old family photographs, I find it interesting to compare the black and white snapshots of my parents on Pass-a-Grille Beach in the years immediately following World War II with the digital color photographs of my son and his high school girlfriend on the same beach more than sixty years later. In that comparison it is easy to find the joy that the sandy beach and water of the Gulf of Mexico have provided to so many for so long. Change, of course, is an intimate part of life. We cannot stop the passage of time. Each generation holds special memories of the world that surrounds them. For Capt. Jim it was the unspoiled beauty of a newly discovered world. For me, it was swimming to an undeveloped island. What it will be for future generations I cannot say. One can only hope that despite continuing growth there will always remain bits and pieces of our used-to-be tours for those who arrive tomorrow.
The Wilderness behind the Walgreens

by Anne Younger

I sat in the pharmacy drive-thru on this busy corner, waiting for my mother’s prescription. Behind the Walgreens were woods. A small pond in front of the car held a tangle of cattail and other marsh plants. The late spring sun set behind me, casting a golden light, silhouetting each leaf in sharp focus against dark storm-threatened sky. I heard the metal on metal sound of a bird song, “conk-a-lee?” I recognized the sound from my youth in the southwest. I rarely hear that song, but I love it. I searched the chaos of the cattails and I saw it — a male red-winged blackbird, perched on a cattail head. With red and yellow sergeant stripes on his shoulders, he claimed this little piece of Eden as his own territory. While watching this bold fellow, I saw my first raccoon, having lived in Pinellas County four years. It was a young one, who shyly peeked out from the reeds and tiptoed past to the dumpster around the corner. What gives? How can there be blackbirds and raccoons on Ulmerton Road?

In the heart of Pinellas County, Ulmerton Road crosses under US 19. Running north and south, US 19 is a limited access highway, the primary route running along the spine of this long thin peninsula from Pinellas Point to Pasco County. Ulmerton bisects the county, running from the Tampa Bay in the east to the gulf beaches in the west. Approximately 53,000 motorists pass this spot each day.

It would be hard to find a spot less like a wilderness than this, the epitome of hostile urban space, a car-culture gone mad. Yet, nature abides here — even thrives.

How does one define wilderness? I have debated this question with environmentalists, back-to-the-land tree huggers and eco-hippies. Is it the concept of a pure state, defined by the absences — no motors, no trash, no permanent residents, no humans? I have friends who think highflying jets and satellites should be forbidden from passing over wilderness areas. I think wilderness is defined by the word “wild,” as in “not tamed.”
In our culture, we have the fanciful notion that we have control over the places where we live. We collectively think that we can dump chemicals on our lawns to control what grows there and how well. We move plants and animals around on the landscape, get rid of some pests while inviting the attractive, entertaining, or useful species. But no matter how many gators are taken out of a pond, there is always the possibility of more coming back. The animals that live around Largo don’t know that they live in a city; they simply live where they can find food, shelter and mates. They are just like the rest of us.

For eight years, I lived with my elderly parents as their caregiver. My dad had heart disease and mobility problems, my mom had a whole host of problems, including dementia. Our days were dominated by doctors’ appointments, home visits from physical and occupational therapists, pill counting, special diets, and medical equipment. All that effort was an attempt to hold death away, to control disease, to tame the nature of aging.

We lived in the Ranchero Village Mobile Home Park in Largo, one of the largest parks in the county, with roughly one thousand homes. Ranchero Village was built in 1978 on Ulmerton between 66th Street and Belcher Road. The original owner of this park retired in 2005 and wanted to sell his business. Developers salivated at the prospect of this huge, centrally located tract. They could build thousands of townhomes, sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars each.

Florida law requires the owner of a mobile home park to offer the land for sale to the tenants first, and they have a limited time to make an offer. If the tenants of the land refuse to buy or are unable to meet the owner’s price, the owner can then sell to whomever he wishes. He must then pay each resident $1500 for their mobile home. A doublewide home counts as two, so my parents stood to get $3000 for the $34,000 home they had purchased only two years before. In theory, they could have used that cash to relocate the home, but doublewides are virtually impossible to move. Happily, the residents were able to get together and come up with a price that we could afford and the owner would accept. We were saved from having to move.
Our purchase was across the street from a lozenge-shaped artificial lake, with a fountain in the middle and a gazebo at one end. If we had been overlooking the lake, we would have paid a premium price, an additional $3,000. As it was, we had our own version of waterfront, a tiny creek, or what I called a creek. Really, it was a stormwater drain with a few inches of water, probably spring fed since it never ran completely dry.

My mom had been mentally sharp as a razor, but by the time she was eighty-four, she suffered from serious short-term memory loss. She had a difficulty remembering when she took her pills, and before I moved in, overdoses were common. She forgot what she was talking about only a few seconds before. The awful thing for me was that she didn’t realize the seriousness of her condition. She forgot she was forgetful. It hurt to see the cloud of uncertainty pass over her face when she couldn’t comprehend something.

Mom never graduated from high school, a fact that she had expressed shame over, yet she was a woman of letters and an artist. When she went through menopause, she began to write — mostly sonnets and other poetic forms. She also wrote short stories about her childhood in Washington and Kentucky. A consummate storyteller, she loved an audience. She developed an early love of nature that she passed on to me. One place she wrote about was the creek by her grandmother’s house, often describing the wildlife she saw there.

I was happy that we had a creek in our backyard. Maybe this would keep her interested in the world; maybe us, her and me and nature, could control the advancing dementia.

We would take lawn chairs and sit in the shade to bird watch. There were usually herons, egrets, storks and cranes. Blue jays, and mocking birds sang it the oaks. Green parrots flocked and squawked in the grass. Mallards nested in the bushes and dabbled in the water, munching duckweed and the other green stuff choking the spot.
One spring, there was a mallard drake who stayed in our driveway for five weeks. He stood near the end of the car, not quite on the narrow sidewalk, not quite under the bumper. The metal-flake green of his head was exactly the color of my Saturn. Was this what attracted him? A field guide said that nineteen percent of mallards engage in male-male homosexual bonding. Did he think the car was a great, big, good-looking duck?

Every spring, I would watch a parade of a mother duck and four to eight baby ducklings march from creek to lake and back. I tried to go out and stop traffic to let them safely pass, but usually the old ladies living in the park who daily rode their three-wheeled bikes were not in a hurry to run down the tiny, stripped ducklings. It turned out that during those five weeks, there was a mallard hen nesting nearby in the bushes under our overhanging bay window.

The house was a two-bedroom metal box with an added sunroom. In Arizona, this kind of enclosure is called an “Arizona Room.” Here in Largo, it is a “Florida Room.” I wonder what this would be called in Alaska. They call it a lanai in Hawaii, and I like this word. This conjures images of palm-thatched teak structures on a beach somewhere, open to the elements, connected to the landscape. I connected to the landscape in this room, the walls on two sides were single-paned glass windows and the roof was channeled hollow aluminum. Every raindrop drummed on the roof, the rising sun streamed in, the wind slapped the Norfolk pine against the roof. It was like living in a tent, or the plywood campground cabins of my youth.

This park and the creek in the back yard were wonderful for spotting wildlife. The raccoon at the Walgreens was just the beginning. Many times, I woke to the sounds of bird songs — some familiar, some not. One morning, I heard what resembled the sound of a flute or whistle. There were five white ibises probing the grass along the creek. Every night, I heard the call of a chuck-will’s widow. One day, on my way to my nature writing class, I was stopped by an odd tall bird standing in the middle of the street. It was brown with white spots, dappled like a fawn. It was shaped differently from the wading birds I knew. It was not concerned
with the cars that came up on it, and looked indifferently at the
guy honking his horn. I walked into the street and coaxed it over to
the sidewalk. Its beak was shorter and blunter than an ibis and its
legs were dark brown, but clearly it was a wading bird. It seemed
taller than an ibis and had a shorter neck than an egret or heron. I
discovered that it was a limpkin. The field guide said limpkins eat
apple snails, but there didn’t seem to be any of those around. The
limpkin didn’t stay for long, this was just a momentary oasis.

There were more than just birds around. Possums pushed in
the bricks that made up the skirting under our home and took
up residence. Raccoons tore into the trash if left out at night.
Armadillos dug up the lawn looking for grubs and Jerusalem
crickets. Rabbits were all over, running down the street at night in
my headlights like daredevils. Fruit rats raided the orange trees,
leaving spent husks on the ground. And then one day, on my way
back from the dumpster, I saw an otter.

The dumpster area is on the west side of the park, bordered by
Belcher Road. On a bright winter day, driving the requisite twenty
miles an hour, a sinuous black animal bounded across the street in
front of the car. It was low to the ground and very long. How odd,
I thought, that looked like an otter. At the zoo, the otters swam up
against the glass a few inches away. I know what an otter looks like.
I also know what a weasel looks like, and a ferret. Ferrets are about
twenty inches long, generally light in color with short tails. This
animal was at least three feet long and dark. Weasels are smaller
than ferrets, darker, and have longer tails. By process of elimination,
I knew this was an otter.

I sped up my car to where it disappeared between the houses and
tried to spot it again. It was there, just about fifty feet away; just a
glimpse before its long muscular tail disappeared around a corner.
It was now running parallel to my car. I tracked it between the
houses and finally lost sight of it by the tennis courts. It seemed to
be headed south.

At home, Google Earth showed the surrounding area. Where
could it have come from and where was it going? Otters live near
water, and it would need a pond or bayou with fish and shellfish to survive. Across Belcher is a small lake ringed on three sides by houses. Maybe that was where it came from. To the south, a slough connected to the Cross Bayou Canal, a series of waterways running diagonally across the county, from Feather Sound to Lake Seminole, toward the Gulf. Hopefully this otter was going to end up somewhere like that.

The next animal encounter was just a few weeks later. I was startled awake by a horrible noise on the roof at 3:30 a.m. As I mentioned before, the roof is hollow metal and amplifies the sound. This was a yowling sound like a cat and another sound like the whoop-whooping of a guinea pig. Cast in moonlight on the wall of my neighbor’s house, I saw a Herculean struggle between two animals, roughly the same size and shape, roundish and much bigger than cats. They were fighting and the whoop-whoop seemed plaintive and pleading. The battle raged for what seemed an eternity, but was probably two minutes. Then it was quiet. Something scrambled over the metal mansard trim on the house. It was a large raccoon, climbing down the Norfolk pine overhanging our roof. The animal still on the roof cast his shadow on the wall, then continued to walk around and hoot softly. He was up there for the rest of the day, moving around. We still don’t know what that was. There was no way I was going to get out the extension ladder and stick my face up over the mansard to face an injured and upset animal.

My dad figured it must be a possum. His reasoning was this: armadillos and otters can’t climb, cats don’t whoop-whoop like that, and it sounded different from the raccoon that climbed down. Can nutria (like a giant guinea pig) climb? We couldn’t think of any other animal it could be. Whatever mammals were living around there, we heard them running on the roof at all hours. Some were heavy enough to make the metal flex under foot, too heavy to be rats or squirrels.

When I mentioned all these animal encounters to friends, they would say to call a trapper or exterminator. Here is the rub. Wilderness is a state of wildness, something beyond the control of
humans. Even though it is annoying and perhaps inconvenient to have raccoons, possums, and rats on the roof, or ducks and limpkins in the street, it isn’t something we need to control. Besides, what would a trapper do with a raccoon from Largo? Would they take him to a new area, where he would have to compete with an existing population? He’d have to learn a new landscape, find food and a way to live. That doesn’t seem fair. This was almost what the owner of this park was going to do to us. We would rather have this wildness as a neighbor than not. For all the bother, it is charming to have wild animals living so close by. We opted to live and let live.

Maybe the idea of wilderness comes from a biblical point of view, harkening back to the origin story of the Garden of Eden. The idea that there can be a perfect state and that human presence despoils that perfection. Human = sin and corruption. I walked along my creek and wondered about the animals I found there. I wondered why they had chosen to live here. Didn’t they know that a few miles along this slough they could find a place with no traffic? A few miles over, the ibises could find their Eden. There was obviously something here that attracted them, perhaps they recognized in me a kindred spirit? Wilderness surrounds us; it never went anywhere. Human civilization is just a thin veneer resting on the world, like a crust — easily swept away. This is not to say we should do whatever we want, with no fear of the consequences. But maybe we should be less afraid for the birds and more afraid for ourselves.
The nest is built into a Tillandsia, the air plant
And the bird who loves the air
Might well feel at home in it.
The nest is weightless in my hand
As would be the bird
Whose bones are filled with air
Weightless
But substantial
Vital as
Breath.

The architect, most likely the local drab brown female cardinal,
Made a brilliant choice—
Who needs to be gaudy red when you are smart—
She chose
Tillandsia, shaped like a nest, the size of a large grapefruit,
A perfect scaffolding.
The plant’s tentacles intertwine
Round and round each other,
The cardinal needs only scoop out the center.
For this, dear architect, did you use your clawing feet?
Your beak?
Both?
I have so many questions.

The answers can only be found in the architectural drawings
mapped in the mind
of a small, smooth feathered head which
pictures the design
remembers
shapes, sizes, textures
and how to arrange each element,
composed
into a unified utility.
How long, how difficult was the construction?
Sliver thin twigs have been bent,
Bits of grape vine collected
Then inserted into the Tillandsia,
Threaded through the tiny curls of grape vine ends.
The stitching secures dry, flaky particles of Live Oak seedpods.

Precise, dexterous, an ingenious problem-solver and planner.
The architect knows how to balance beauty with practicality.
I practice the same day by day and find in you inspiration.

What was next indicated in the plans?
Perhaps, architect you decided
To lift dry, gray Spanish moss
Lacy bit by lacy bit
Flitting back and forth
Labored wings
Nest to branch
branch to nest
you knew that
moss matted down, then mixed with dirt
makes a sturdy stucco
Was this an ancient knowledge inherited from
Your dinosaur DNA?

To the stucco, lodged as if glued is
A one-by-one inch square of plastic netting from a bag of fruit.
Architect, this raises more questions.
How was the perfect size of plastic netting first located, then
chosen?
Was this serendipity?
Or was it a memory of a bright white, crisscrossed thing you spied
from the air?
This plastic web has little function so
Did it thrill or amuse you?
Who can say it didn’t?
And why did you place this swatch of netting
On only one side of your nest?
Was this a statement?
A signature?  
Who can say it wasn’t?  
Or was it for fun?  
Do you like fun like I like fun?  
Who can say you don’t?

Woven between the Spanish moss, Tillandsia fibers and fragile, tiny twigs are three strips of cotton from an old cloth bandage.  
Was this only for comfort?  
Do you like the softness against your face?  
Like I like softness?  
Who can say you don’t?

Six strips of silver tinsel from an old Christmas tree  
are inserted at the top of the nest.  
Are you making a case for beauty?  
Is this a sign of aesthetics in a life otherwise dominated by survival?  
Like mine?  
Who can say it isn’t?  
The tinsel is fragile, not material for construction but sparkles,  
sparkles!  
in the sun.  
Do you and I both delight in things that shine?  
Who dares to say you don’t?  
Like any clever architect  
You balance beauty with practicality.  
I attempt the same  
day by day  
And in you find inspiration.  
I never knew your sill,  
Your jokes, your artistry  
Until you stopped my mind  
When I found your home.
Knowing Salt Creek
by Alison Hardage

I was born in St. Petersburg. I grew up at a time when I could ride my horse from one end of the Lake Maggiore/Salt Creek watershed to the other, from Little Bayou to Boca Ciega Bay. I have sailed single-handed up Salt Creek a few times and paddled along it too. Lake Maggiore, the Boyd Hill Nature Trail, and the tennis courts at Bartlett Park and Lakewood Country Club were regular recreation destinations in my youth.

Snippets and episodes from my childhood of everything positive and privileged Salt Creek had to offer make me aware that no matter how tatty its present condition, it can be healed. Indeed, Salt Creek suffers post-traumatic stress disorder, just as many of its local residents suffer social stresses and violence. It needs nurturing and respect. Its presence of the lake and its waterways was a dynamic
factor in the plans of the nationally famous landscape architect, John Nolen. In the 1920s, the City of St. Petersburg hired the notable Philadelphian to guide their growth. City Councils have considered Nolen’s proposals from time to time. It would be grand if they could follow through with his vision before another hundred years pass by.

John Nolen must have known Mill Creek. He must have known what to avoid. Recently, another landscape architect, Anne Whiston Spirn, devoted years of rehabilitative efforts to lifting Mill Creek out of its PTSD. She enlisted young residents to become ambassadors of their environment. Spirn and her students took local youth on a big explore of their hundred acre wood and cultivated their appreciation for what nature once offered their neighborhood. The key to her extraordinary success was engaging children in the process. In turn, they passed on their revelations to their schools, their family members and their neighbors. Spirn and her crew facilitated this ability to see Mill Creek through the eyes of children. Such a simple and human inclination was the foundation of Anne Whiston Spirn’s inspiring process.

The greater Salt Creek is ripe for such a project. Preliminary plans are in the making. Personal knowledge helps me know this can work. Just last weekend, I met a young boy holding up a poster at Weedon Island Preserve. He explained he wanted to help make Weedon Island a United States National Park.
Blockage
by Michael Sadler

My deadline approaches. To my dismay, I cannot think of a single thing. I rack my clogged brain. I sit in front of a computer, a notebook, anything, nothing.

It’s odd. Writer’s block never happened to me before. It is as if my mind has a blockage that prevents the flow of ideas. Time to do some menial tasks.

I received new filters for my turtle tank, shipped same day Amazon Prime. The pump needs a good scrubbing; it’s covered in turtle crap. I pull the pump out of Lou’s aquarium and scrub the foul slime I find and tell myself it’s not turtle crap I’m scrubbing. My mind wanders and I think of my trips to Salt Creek and Bartlett Pond.

The water is slow and the sediment looks slimy and sludgy, like turtle crap. Except I have never seen a turtle before in my close to a dozen trips up and down the creek.

The muck makes the creek appear foul. A greasy layer of filth under the water tells the history of south Saint Petersburg. The creek is a dumping ground, a sacrificial piece of nature. We should strive to not sacrifice nature. Salt Creek is a bad choice for sacrifice. The accumulation of trash, sludge, and fecal matter is proof. But, every now and then, humanity needs ritual slaughter.

The blockages go farther than just the sludge and crap. The creek is like a splinter hanging off tree bark. A dam blocks Salt Creek and Bartlett Pond from Lake Maggiore, and beyond that, a highway fragments the natural swale of south Saint Petersburg, disconnecting Clam Bayou from Lake Maggiore. The various blockages and breaks of the creek are the wounds that resulted in the death of the area. The area was sacrificed for the good of the northern residents and progress.

Most people don’t think of a filthy creek like that, and even those who do care about nature and perhaps nature writing
will most likely only see the creek one way — as humans destroying good nature. However, there is more to the story of Salt Creek than just its gradual death over the past century. Trash litters the mangrove roots, murky waters, and is spread across foul looking muddy shore; several bottles of cleaners and soaps emerge into view as we paddle down the creek. A newly deceased great blue heron hangs from the mangrove branches tangled in fishing strings like a marionette for the mangrove tree and wind to play with.

How?

How did the items and resources make their way into the creek? The how, is the story missing in Salt Creek— and in most nature writing. The journey of the empty Tide jug and what it took to become the home for barnacles at the bottom of Salt Creek tells the story of nature and how we use it.

My back aches as I bend over my tub and scrub my turtle’s pump. As I scrape gunky grime away, lightning strikes.

Figuratively.

My own blockage is gone and my brain is no longer on the sacrificial block. I think of the water I am using and how it is a resource and the journey it will take once I contaminate it with my turtle poop.

Perhaps I’ll write about the resources we use, like my turtle and water, and writer’s block.

I’m free flowing.
Below the Canopy

by Heather Jones

The creek digs into the earth flowing
pushing tannic water past
the brown mosaic trunks of pines
a hundred feet high.

Our kisses and murders below the canopy
send stones careening down the banks splash
birds chasing each other through
cracking brown branches.

We are the resurrection and the life
of footsteps etched in red and yellow
leaves the communion
of the sandy roots
the twisted vines
the toad pretending it’s a stone.
The old saying goes that you reap what you sow. We tend to think about this as meaning that the things we do now return to us in the future, or even, more philosophically, that the habits of today shape the tomorrow we’ll inhabit. The future will take its revenge or yield its reward, according to our actions today. I live in a small beachside town squeezed between a densely populated city to the north, our county’s largest remaining estuary to the east, and a rising ocean to the south. Like so many coastal communities today, we’re starting to see what a climate change future will look like (rising waters, fiercer storms, periodic flooding, less beachfront development), even as we are confronting the fact that just a few short generations of fossil fuel prosperity have unleashed this extraordinary change on the world. There’s a profound injustice in the fact that the reaction to our actions will be the burden of the coming generations. This seems a time to be looking to the future, salvaging the inheritance we will leave our children.

But, as deeply embedded as it is in the experience of the past, that isn’t how human consciousness works. Though it reputedly can’t be changed, the past persistently resurfaces with the specter of where we went astray, things we have lost, and people we have wronged. The past is the greater part of our story, and — for most of us mere mortals, at least — the past creates the conditions by which we judge the future. So before we can guess at the impact we will have on future generations, I believe we need to measure the impact the past is having on us, to understand how it shapes our beliefs, our frames of reference, our sense of what is possible. Before we can conjure our effect on the future, in other words, we have to understand how the past comes back to haunt us.

When my mother was nine years old, she had, and then lost, a pet alligator. It all began when she and my uncle asked my great grandmother, who kept an eye on them during the long summer days while their parents were at work, to buy them a baby gator — you know, while she was out doing the shopping. They were both great fans of Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom and were keen, I suppose, to bring the ancient evolutionary struggle of man and
lizard to their own living room. Had they asked their parents about this, my great grandmother wondered. Of course, they assured her. They just didn’t mention that their parents had quite sensibly said no.

An hour later, the saurian arrived in a small cardboard box and spent his (her? how are you supposed to tell?) first afternoon hiding under furniture, slashing upholstery with his tiny claws, and snapping at the fingers of anyone who tried to pick it up. Its truculence reminded them of a certain family member (we’ll call him Billy) and they decided to christen the beast Crucial Billy. I’m not sure what was crucial about him — this was the beginning of the Cold War, and maybe “Crucial” sounded just enough like “Khushchev” when you pronounced it as a Southerner might — but at any rate, the name seemed to fit, so Crucial it was and Crucial it would remain.

The battle for the living room continued until about four that afternoon, when they began to think of their parents return. The magnitude of their disobedience began to sink in. Buying a dangerous pet without parental consent and allowing it to tear up half the furniture in the living room would surely result in some kind of punishment, perhaps the kind that involves imprisonment into your early thirties. Plus, there was the even more pressing matter of how to care for an animal who accepted no cuddling, could not be brushed or walked or shown, and clearly craved the taste of human flesh. In a desperate attempt to hide the evidence, they concealed Crucial in their basement, half-filling an old laundry sink for him to swim in, and vowed to sneak him table scraps every day. Then they did what all of us poor sinners do, and hoped for the best.

You probably know how this story ends. But then again, maybe you don’t. Crucial was indeed discovered, only moments after my grandfather returned home. But after the initial surprise, my grandfather showed his true colors, which were of a warm and tender tint. Instead of forcing his children to return Crucial to whatever unethical merchant had sold him in the first place, or flushing the poor beastie down the toilet, as so many parents in urban legends do, my grandfather built Crucial an alligator palace
in the family’s back yard. It was a sort of glorified doghouse complete with a moat for wallowing and a sandy beach for lounging. There he lived for many happy Alabama summer days, basking on the sand and growing fat on raw hamburger and leftovers.

Then one sad morning, Crucial was gone. Whether he was carried off by a hungry neighbor dog, or a jealous neighbor child, or whether he followed his snout down a mystical current to return to his native waters, remains one of the great mysteries of our family. Crucial, like so many exotic pets before him, disappeared into the urban matrix of ditches, creeks, pools, and sewers, leaving only this story.

Crucial’s memory resurfaced often during my own childhood, which was made richer by the company of many wild and half-wild pets, including a turtle, a sequence of snakes and lizards, cats cheating on their other owners, a frog I ordered in the mail, and a stray puppy we adopted. As a child I would often pause at manholes or drainage grates to listen for a word from Crucial Billy, who I was sure would one day return to the family that once and still loved him. Alligators live a long, long time. For all I knew, he was still stalking the weedy streams of Birmingham, pondering his brief but memorable sojourn in the world of men.

This story is also one strand in a rich tapestry of urban mythology revolving around rogue alligators, snakes, and other exotic pets. Many city sewer systems are laden with stories of strange species lurking in the city’s inner workings, usually as a result of their rejection or escape from civilized society. And while I never owned an alligator of my own, my herpetological companions took the form of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, for whom I felt a strong sense of kinship. The Turtles franchise began in the early 1980’s as a parody of popular comic book topics and evolved into a series of television shows and films. The series stars a motley crew of household pets — including four turtles and a rat belonging to a ninja — who are exposed to a radioactive isotope that transforms them into anthropomorphic, sewer-dwelling ninjutsu warriors who fight crime by night. I spent many a long summer day crouched in the dark cave behind my grandmother’s recliner, conjuring the Turtles, making plans to rescue the city once again, and dashing with a loud cry out to the yard to practice my katana moves.
The Turtles embody the heroic side of the rogue reptile myth, preserving law and order for a society that rejects them as dangerous mutants. These anti-heroes dwell in the city sewers, a space which is both a critical part of the city — indeed, since the late nineteenth century, a hallmark of the modernized city — and also the city’s antithesis. The sewers are a kind of parallel universe where the uncivilized matter that cities produce — foul smells, storm runoff, garbage, and most importantly, human waste — form their own lawless anti-city.

The show even featured its own incarnation of the sewer gator myth: Leatherhead, an enormous bipedal alligator with a bodacious southern accent and whip which he wielded in true Simon Legree fashion to force the labor of those he captured. True to form, Leatherhead began life as an innocent pet alligator who was flushed down the toilet by the parents of his young owner. After this violent rejection from human society, set loose in the sewers, Leatherhead was captured by wicked Kraang the Brain, archenemy of the turtles, who subjected him to the terrible science experiments that turned him into a giant (and presumably gave him the ability to speak). Though similar to the Turtles in his origins, Leatherhead trod a different moral path, a deeply ambiguous character who owed allegiance only to himself, sometimes fighting for and sometimes fighting against the Turtles, but always seeking active revenge against the human forces that rendered him a monstrosity.

The two stories — that of a lost alligator and that of alligator-turned-supervillain — are animated by the common idea that the wild things we reject in order to construct our human world can somehow return from the liminal spaces into which we cast them. In Freudian terms, this is the return of the repressed: a discarded, forgotten object that resurfaces to trouble our imaginations, refusing to stay in the past where we left it. We might call these misplaced herps a kind of return of the ecological repressed, signaling as they do that our failure to deal responsibly with issues like exotic pets and toxic waste will come back to haunt us.
In Florida, where I live now, we are constantly reminded of the habitat we’ve erased by the very literal return of the saurian repressed. With an estimated 1.3 million gators within state boundaries — that’s one gator for every twenty Floridians — we don’t just find urban gators in the obvious places, like the lakes, canals, and occasionally the swimming pools that pepper our landscape. The contact zone between alligator habitats and the built environment, which pushes outward a little every day, is littered with comic and tragic encounters that bring the urban alligator myth to life.

Recent headlines from across the state record alligator sightings in virtually every corner of the human scene: this past May, a fifteen-foot gator was spotted strolling across the greens on the Buffalo Creek Golf Course in Palmetto. In June, Fort Myers city workers responding to calls about a foul smell in a neighborhood sewer discovered the carcass of an eleven-foot gator wedged in a catch basin. Even more macabre, Florida Fish and Wildlife officers recently discovered a webbed foot hanging out of the ashtray of a truck they’d stopped for a routine day pass check in the Corbett Wildlife Management Area outside Loxahatchee. The driver soon confessed to illegally hunting a gator, then concealing its dismembered parts throughout the cab of his truck. And of course, the story of Lane Graves, the two-year-old Nebraska boy snatched by an alligator as he waded along a beach at Disney World’s Grand Floridian Resort is perhaps the most upsetting recent example. While everyone agrees that the toddler shouldn’t have been in the water, it’s hard to imagine a landscape that invites more willful forgetting of where you are than the famously escapist Magic Kingdom. The white sand “beaches” bordering the lake where Lane was killed — which appears on Disney maps as “Seven Seas Lagoon” — can mask, but never fully transform the flat, hot, and fierce landscape of central Florida, where, as all Floridians know, an alligator lurks in every puddle.

Maybe these urban gator stories, mythical and otherwise, are really just our culture’s way of challenging one of its own founding myths: that the things we push aside in order to expand our
dominion as a species are, once out of sight, truly gone. Ninja turtles and alligators in the storm drain remind us that, on the contrary, nothing really goes away, it simply comes back in a different form. Species that are pushed aside to create a manmade landscape will, in many cases, try to make do in a different habitat, even as another species moves in to fill the gap.

These days, my search for urban gators takes me just down the road to Clam Bayou. For those of us who live in Gulfport, the Bayou is many things. It’s a fine place for walking or cycling, with a broad paved trail winding lazily along the eastern edge of the water, past ponds filled with birds and fish, under the broad blue sweep of the Florida sky. It’s a spider web of mangrove channels, concealing quiet pools that kayakers love and treasured fishing spots visited by neighborhood anglers, their bicycles heavily balanced with bait buckets, catch buckets, tackle boxes, and rods. It’s a place that’s alive, from lemonade sunrise to tangerine sunset, with the whistle of circling ospreys, the splash-plop of pelicans diving, the low, sonorous croak of the anhinga. I still feel a chill when I remember the day I was pedaling home from work, watching the clouds build to an afternoon storm, and I braked just in time to avoid a broad, languorous cottonmouth winding its way across the bike path between the retention pond and the mangroves. The return of the herpetological repressed.

But even as a wildlife sanctuary, the Bayou is also deeply woven into the landscape of human life here in south Pinellas County. To the north of the bayou, bordering Twenty-Second Avenue South, there is a small golf course built on land reclaimed from the Bayou. Every morning, you can watch the golfers and herons alike rising early to spend their days pacing the greens and sand traps that were once ponds and hummocks. On the Bayou’s eastern border, across from Osgood Point, there is the world’s most casual yacht club, where boats bob merrily in the marina and members lounge under shade trees in plastic lawn chairs, drinking beer and soda. When the old man who cleans his mullet catch every morning at Osgood Point told me that, way back in Bayou along a forgotten mosquito ditch, there lived the world’s last remaining prehistoric giant sloth — the marvel of many scientists from UF — I knew it
couldn’t possibly be true. But I, for just a moment, I did believe him. Along the bayou’s western edge, where the park fades into the backyard of a gated community, there is a fine, manicured forest of pine trees that is the perfect spot for a picnic. A small, fenced shuffleboard court breaks the tree line and gives a glimpse of the regimented rows of identical houses just beyond. Cormorants perch on the wheel of one of the massive drain valves that surround the retention pond and govern the movement of city runoff through the mangrove channels. Strange fragments of city life — soda bottles, deflated basketballs, and old fishing gear — lie tangled in the maze of prop roots along the side of the trail.

The Bayou rides this uneasy tension between wild and civilized space, functioning at once as that “place apart” so many city residents crave, the undeveloped land that birds, fish, and other animals need to survive, and — as we would perhaps prefer to forget — an essential piece of our city’s plumbing. While the sluggish Salt Creek that feeds the Bayou has transformed over the years into a network of ditches, ponds, and weed-choked streambed, the estuary still does its same old job: capturing nutrients from the land and the cleaning the water that passes through it. The Bayou has evolved with the city around it. As the post-war expansion of South St. Petersburg began to pave and divert the Bayou’s watershed, the Bayou choked, losing much of its native vegetation. It began to breathe a little easier again as a 2010-2011 restoration project restored its former flow, adding two large storm water basins catch runoff from Gulfport and St. Petersburg, then drain into the network of mangrove channels leading down to Boca Ciega.

But the balance shifted again for Clam Bayou in late summer of 2015: that July and August, a long stretch of heavy, continuous storms dumped record amounts of rainfall across the Tampa Bay region. In some places, more that twenty inches fell over the span of two weeks, swelling rivers and drainage ditches, flooding streets and foundations, and blocking highway exits. In a region where summer torrents are the norm, road closings are not unheard of. But the extraordinary influx of runoff generated from the storms lead to a more unusual high water problem
when St. Petersburg’s Southwest water treatment facility was overwhelmed. Unable to treat this tide, the plant expelled some of its untreated sewage into the waters of Boca Ciega Bay, causing students at Eckerd College — located adjacent to the plant — to abandon their watersports in the face of the oncoming “poo-nami.” At last, the city chose to load 15.4 million gallons of raw sewage onto trucks and dump it into the retention pond at Clam Bayou. The Bayou was immediately closed to fishing, and bikers and dog walkers were discouraged from using the trails, due to presumed health risks. Gulfport’s beaches, just to west of the Bayou’s mouth, were closed for weeks afterward, and continued to close after heavy rains in the months that followed, as dangerous bacteria continued to leach out of the Bayou.

At the time, this undesirable measure was presented as the only alternative to an outcome even more dangerous and disgusting: allowing raw sewage to backflow into the streets. But I think once again of that temporal calculus by which the deliberate decisions of the past become the emergencies of the present: only three years before the dumping, the City of St. Petersburg had taken its second water treatment facility at Albert Whitted Airport offline. Though this decision required the expansion of the Southwest plant, it also opened up valuable waterfront property in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg.

And while nobody could have predicted the crisis that would arrive in the summer of 2015, the decision seems symptomatic of a larger problem: Florida’s habit of investing in beautification and commercial expansion while ignoring the infrastructure that makes clean and safe urban dwelling possible. Like the mythical (and real) urban alligators that resurface from oblivion in our stories and our headlines, the fecal tide that surged that summer forced us to confront the abject reality of our own waste, the extraordinary lack of planning that forced us to choose between sewage in our streets or sewage in our paradise.

One day soon, my infant son and I will go alligator hunting in the Bayou. We’ll bring a picnic to set up along the edge of the retention pond, and we’ll observe the cormorants sunning along
the spillway, the kingfisher swooping and clattering above the surface of the water. We'll concentrate on the murky surface of the water, watching for a likely swirl of water, a pair of small brown eyes and an olive green snout to gently break the still waters. And when we finally see one, I know he will rejoice, as I do, in the power of this extraordinary being, from its fearsome jaws to its impressive tail. The alligator is an excellent lesson in the evolutionary forces of the world. But so too, for that matter, are the outsized drains and pumps that line the other end of the basin, for in restoring the flow of water and life to the Bayou, they symbolize the new place our species has assumed in the shaping of life on our planet. Knowing something of what the world holds in store for the years to come, I want my son to see the truth and beauty in both, to recognize that we are not challenged to save or redeem the landscape, but to learn to dwell with it.
Blessed by the older generations, the children and grandchildren of slaves. Blessed by the spirit of the never-to-be-forgotten pioneers, who through perseverance, prayer, determination, suffering and endurance, like their ancestors never gave up the dream and promise of a brighter day. Blessed by those early black settlers, who while building the city and struggling to survive never relinquished belief and a liberating hold on the everlasting anchors of faith in God, in justice, and in the hope of promised winds of change that they knew, deep in the marrow of their bones, were bound to come.

One of the pleasantries of writing the rest of the story was the experience of hearing more historical accounts. Almost without exception people of all ages recalled the recent, wretched, raw, race-based years before the advent of civil rights, which finally brought relief and easier times to long-suffering black citizens. The memories were both painful and pleasant and most interviews were not unlike friendly front porch gatherings of old.

Someone invariably asked: “But where did all the mangoes go?”

The question came from those who remember times when no matter what was — or was not — in the ice box, on the supper table or on the grocery list, there was something to eat outside.

It was time when “South Side” children romped through sandspurs, palmettos and pine trees, enjoying access to an endless abundance of hunger-chasing, gut-filling, taste bud-satisfying fruit from trees of unlimited kindness.

Everywhere were wonderful fruit-bearing trees that seems to belong to no one and to everyone. Merciful shade-bearing trees sagged heavy with guavas, avocados, oranges, grapefruit, tangerines and lemons always present for the picking.

“I knew where all the best mango trees were,” Nadine Henderson laughed.
“The turpentines were stringy. Ladyfingers were tasty. But my favorites were the pineapples. They were the best of all.” Nadine’s secret favorite mango tree location was probably shared by every child of the community, but one could hear in her voice the glee of recollection.

Mangoes were not the only hunger-chasing trees of plenty available to one and all. Along Sixteenth Street, from the site of the latter-day John Hopkins Middle School to the corner of Ninth Avenue South, a sprawling Gill Dairy Farm stood framed by some of the city’s best avocado trees. Huge avocados fell to the ground and were readily available to any passerby.

Like the mango, avocado trees graced yards of the many private homes and open fields throughout the Southside community. Guavas, like mangoes, also were plentiful in a variety of flavors. White meat, yellow meat and pink meat described the delicate, succulent seed-filled fruit. They were the source of delicious homemade jam and jelly in many homes.

Many nurturing trees towered fifty feet tall in open fields, tempting fearless boys and girls — and young men and women — to climb the heights for choice rewards. Bushy guava trees were less of a challenge and more plentiful in backyards than woods, and more easily accessible.

Sparkling Tampa Bay offered shiners, sheepshead, grouper, red snapper, crabs and other sea life, which — like the fruit trees — was important to survival, especially during the Great Depression when work was scarce or often nonexistent.

But of all the readily accessible food sources of nature, mangoes are the most affectionately remembered. I noted at some point the longstanding absence of the once plentiful trees, particularly because growing up I enjoyed the crème de las crème of mangoes. Years later during an unforgettable stay in Haiti, I was awed by the size, color and majestic splendor of the exotic fruit hanging in profusion and royal grandeur in magnificent canopies of indescribably beauty. By day, they offered surreal displays of oval,
succulent goodness in mixed, vibrant colors of red, yellow, orange, purple and gold, enhanced by the light of day. In the middle of the night, falling fruit ceremoniously thumped the earth like drumbeats.

Mango trees still can be spotted here and there in St. Petersburg, but the abundant harvest, once so readily available, is gone. Old-timers with cherished childhood memories wonder why.

Remember the big freeze of 1961 around Christmastime? Remember when orange groves and woods, and almost every other thing green turned brown as if ravaged by fire? That’s when the mangoes died, I believe — and guavas, oranges, lemons, tangerines and mulberries, too.

When is the last time you saw a guava? There was a time when guavas, like mangoes, were plentiful in a variety of flavors. You could find them in fields and the backyards of generous neighbors, friends and strangers. But all of that has changed. Gone are open fields. And backyards are becoming scarce.

As Forrest Gump might have said in his simplistic, but profound manner of speaking, “Things change.” They do and they have. The greatest blessing of change is that racism no longer paralyzes the heart and soul of St. Petersburg, Florida. And in recent years, the major hub of the city, downtown St. Petersburg, has been resurrected. It embraces a cultural and physical renaissance of gargantuan proportions. Part of south St. Petersburg, historically defined as the major residential area for most of the city’s black residents, in 2007 is officially known as Midtown, with many improvements and necessary amenities present. It continues to be a work in progress.

And while the consensus of the people is at “we’ve come a long way baby, but we still have a long way to go,” the good news in view of undeniable progress is that there is still room for hope [...].

But a legacy of courageous leadership lives on. “Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail,” was a lesson well learned. Those words of Ralph
Waldo Emerson speak to the continuum of strength, vision and tenacity willed to younger generations. Many grasped the mantle of ambition, responsibility and pride. They continue to make a difference in the lives of countless children, in society, in the city and indeed in the world.

St. Petersburg today is nearly bereft of mangoes and other cherished fruits of trees from neighborhood yards, but the city is still wealthy with a continuing supply of the soul-sustaining fruit of the human spirit.

_Previously published in Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, St. Petersburg’s Historic African American Neighborhoods (Charleston: History Press, 2008). Reprinted with permission._
Contributors

Jack Alexander was a crime reporter extraordinaire who became a legendary city editor at the Evening Independent, St. Petersburg’s afternoon newspaper from 1906 until its 1986 closure.

Wendy Joan Biddlecombe is a writer and editor who lives in The Bronx, New York.

Roy Peter Clark teaches writing at the Poynter Institute. Among his most recent books is Writing Tools.

Russell Crumley, a native Floridian, lived in the Old Southeast neighborhood of St. Petersburg. Before his untimely death, he was writing a book called Southsiders.

Kent “Kip” Curtis teaches environmental history at the Ohio State University. His first book, Gambling on Ore, was published in 2013.

Sally Gage is an anthropologist who studies the migrational patterns of the North American werewolf. She has been featured on the Travel Channel’s Mysteries at the Museum.

Hannah Gorksi recently completed her Master of Liberal Arts degree at USFSP. She currently lives in Mexico.

Amanda Hagood is Director of Special Academic Projects at Eckerd College.

Thomas Hallock, Professor of English at USFSP, is writing a travel book about teaching the American literature survey, A Road Course in American Literature (www.roadcourse.us).

Alison Hardage, a Florida native, is currently enrolled in the Florida Studies Program at USFSP.

Sarah Hierl recently graduated from USFSP.

Jacqueline Williams Hubbard attended Gibbs High School, Bryn Mawr College and Boston University. She practiced law for forty years and is founding President of the St. Petersburg branch of the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History.
Bob Devin Jones is co-founder and longstanding director of the Studio@620.

Heather Jones lives in St. Petersburg, Florida, and teaches at USFSP.

Sarah Kirstine Lain is a writing instructor at the Art Institute of Tampa and a poetry instructor at the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum. She graduated with her MFA in poetry from Lesley University and is the assistant editor for Poems2go. Her work was recently published in BODY literary journal.

Bill Marden, formerly a journalist for the St. Petersburg Evening Independent, is also the Jacksonville-based writer Daniel Quentin Steele.

David Lee McMullen has been a vice cop, Marine Corps tank commander, VISTA volunteer, journalist, speechwriter, media spokesperson, lobbyist, association manager, public relations executive, Mr. Mom, barista and university professor. Writing is his passion and his work has been published widely.

Gloria Muñoz is a writer, translator and educator whose writing has appeared in publications including The Best New Poets Anthology, Acentos Review, and Going Om.

Brandy Nichols recently graduated from USFSP.

Dave Pacetti is probably in the Everglades somewhere.

Rosalie Peck was a St. Petersburg native who became a social worker in several major cities across the United States before retiring to her hometown.

Anda Peterson is an adjunct instructor of writing at USFSP. Her most recent book is Walks with Yogi, the Enlightenment Experiment.

Ariel Ringo teaches tenth and eleventh grade English at Gibbs High School.

Michael Sadler recently graduated from USFSP’s graduate program in English Education. He teaches at Osceola Fundamental High School.
Cathy Salustri is the arts and entertainment editor at Creative Loafing Tampa. Her book, Backroads of Paradise, chronicles her travelings down Florida’s Depression-era driving tours.

Scarlett Schiraldi, book designer, earned her Bachelors of Arts Degree with a concentration in Graphic Design from USFSP. She also works in the Undergraduate Admissions Office.

Michelle Sonnenberg is pursuing a Master of Liberal Arts degree from USFSP, where she is focusing on place, space, and the environment.

April Sopczak is a writing skills specialist at Kansas State University in the McNair Scholars Program.

Daniel Spoth teaches American literature at Eckerd College. His work has appeared in many professional journals, including Americana, FORUM, The Mississippi Quarterly, and ELH.

Arielle Stevenson is freelance writer and journalist. She recently finished her Master’s in Florida Studies at USFSP.

Eric Vaughan recently completed dual master’s degrees at USFSP, and his currently working on a doctorate in educational leadership at USF Tampa.

Resie Waechter is a St. Petersburg native, studying English and History at USFSP.

Jon Wilson is a longtime St. Petersburg journalist who works for the Florida Humanities Council.

Anne Younger is a working writer, editor, graduate of USFSP, President of Pinellas Writers (PINAWOR) and working on her first novel.