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“PARADISE”

“It's been said that some people come to South Florida because it's flat and there are no hills where anybody can get a good shot at them.” DP

Paradise? Gators in the water, gators by the road, gators in uniform, gators playing golf, liars dice and poker. Don't feed them. Once fed by humans, they're deadly; when they chomp your hand, they'll keep right on eating.

Paradise? When the train whistle blows at 3.04 am, I know it's the Hopeland Express to this flatland for the lost, the taken, the about to be taken, this home of the down, the drifty, the dreamer, where Hialeah flamingos fly on cue, gangsters push baby carriages in front of cameras and Snowbirds migrate south with TVs under their arms. As the retired airlines stewardess said, “They come to play or get planted.”

Paradise? Imagine not-so-long-ago Pompano Beach string bean farmers saying prayers to honor their forefathers. Imagine forests of string beans. Imagine miles of Dania's succulent red tomatoes?

Paradise? Listen to the saw grass rustle, the sweet pine sway. Listen to the light on the heron's legs. Smell the osprey's great fishy feathers, hear those brown pelican beaks slice and splash, the scratch of tiny crabs on mangrove trees. Hear Florida squawk dawn with a thousand parrots flying somewhere. Drive East with the sun at YOUR back. WATCH THE amazing crackling lightning RIP THE DARK PINK HORIZON bigger than Imax, wider than time.

Paradise? Beautiful sculpted women writhe and dance, pose and romance, in a dazzle of maybe shank and circumstance, hope and nightmare, rolled down an endless strip of store-bought sand and nightclubs where wannabes stand in line.

You, you and *you*, come on IN! *Not* you! Hey you! Who do you think *you* are? Are you, *you*? You! Come on IN!

Paradise? South Florida promises love, escape in a boat, a dance, a song, a hot day on the beach, a big fish. Promises hurricanes, oil spills, low wages, a way out and the largest per capita cellular phone sales in the country. Sometimes South

Florida still shows up at the party wearing an armful of stolen watches, so how do we keep a firm hand on truth. What matters? What's real?

On the map, Key West appears like the fangs of the snake, but in Key West, you can get out of your car and walk around. Paradise? Imagine WALKING? Florida GET OUT OF YOUR CAR!

In this land of hock-it-to-me baby nights, monkey snatchers, kidnappers, gem smugglers, marlin swipers, panther eaters, Boca bee bashers, murderers, dope peddlers, neo-new age carnival hawkers, we kill a millennium of fresh water with the single drop of a cigarette butt. Here gray squirrels dash between car horns and bulldozers. Here the opossum noses its heavy life along our back fences, the alligator grows smaller, and the otter's eye blinks good bye, the tree frogs breath feels so tiny and the burrowing owl's pale ch-who-ch-who-who whimpers at dusk. Here, the great loggerhead turtle climbs from her midnight sea to lay eggs. How can she be so sure? Where does she find this strength? How can she go on?

How might I go on? It's flat. It's crazy. Irascible. Mysterious. But I must KEEP TALKING to my South Florida.

My red mangrove grandmother

May I sooth your dried eyes with clear water

May I brush your hair with pink fresh air

May I stroke your bony hands and your flat endless skin with sure fingers

May I hold you forever delicately, just a little bit longer.