

Queen of the Night*

The long ribbed stems of the night blooming cereus climb up the trunks of two cabbage palm trees to the right. Reaching the top boots of the trees they arch backwards like the ribs of an umbrella. At the base of the trees the stems push their way across crushed shell towards the white stucco foundation and three large glass doors that open into the sunroom of our Sanibel home. A large black racer slithers along the base of the doors, stopping periodically to scan the surface of the glass, looking for its next meal, a cuban anole. The anole's long toes suction to the glass panel while its orange dewlap pulsates in warning to the predator. The anole metamorphs into a pair of lubber grasshoppers, the male clinging to the female's back. With a face that resembles Darth Vader, the female's bright orange and yellow colors signal to the snake that she is poisonous. Beyond the grasshopper, hordes of black wingless lubber nymphs cover the wild coffee and rosemary bushes. Carrying their own internal poisons they stay oblivious to the carolina wrens hopping along the ground and the catbird pair perched on the limbs of the elderberry bushes just a few feet away.

Suddenly from the left lumbers along a gopher tortoise, each stumpy hind leg moving in precise harmony with its shovel shaped partner, propelling it forward. It's head is cocked pointed to some distant sandy burrow. Discerning some movement around it, perhaps its own reflection in the glass, the tortoise pauses ever so briefly before resuming its paces. A marsh rabbit nibbles away at the green leaves of the orange amaryllis plants but keeps her black-button eyes wide open, wary of any four-legged creatures that may lurk nearby. It knows to avoid the milkweed plants visited each fall by migrating monarch butterflies. The rabbit's main danger, a bobcat, visits regularly, trotting across the pine straw and patio stones, once in the spring accompanied by two cubs, much darker in color than their mother. They zig-zag in bounding light steps but always close in on their mother when they stray too far.

From between the elderberry bushes and strangler fig suddenly appears the long blunted snout of an alligator. Spring is the time when alligators move from pond to pond in search of mates, and he has come from a neighbor's yard. He lays still for a while, then lifts his ponderous body, and "high-steps" his way diagonally across the yard and out of view. His ultimate goal is a pond across the pit-shell lane.

A rustling in the fig tree grows into a disturbing cacaphony of catbird calls heard through the patio screening. Except for the quivering of bird wings and branches, nothing seems different. But out to the left between two beautyberry shrubs, a florida panther, her long sweeping tail brushing aside strands of pine straw, stares back. Her face, with its piercing yellow eyes and long narrow snout gives off an air that is majestic, self-confident, almost pharaonic. Calmly and slowly she turns and disappears through a mass of cocoplum and coontie.

In June something stirs within the night blooming cereus vines. Tiny white buds suddenly appear all along the vine, even those parts withered, gray, seemingly lifeless. The buds swell over a period of a few days giving the appearance of white Christmas lights strung along the palms. One night, a few hours before midnight, the swollen buds open up to display large pearly white flowers the size of one's palm. Before a backdrop of a full moon the beauty is breathtaking. Then soon after twelve the ethereal display begins to wane and by morning the limp, grayish remains of each flower droop from the vine. The extraordinary appearance of the night-blooming cereus, the so called mythical "queen of the night" evokes both a sense of good fortune to have been able to witness such a stunning beauty if even for just one night, and yet a sense of sadness for the ephemeral nature of it all, that something so transformational in its beauty can be so fleeting in its presentation.

For over twenty-three years our night-blooming cereus sent forth her slender sinuous fingers towards our home's foundation, through bushes and grasses in our small backyard. She oversaw a menagerie of creatures – insects, snakes, lizards, turtles and mammals that made their way

across our patio, climbed our walls, and peered through our glass doors and windows. One dark moonless night in June of '22, our cereus, as she had done year after year, displayed her exquisite beauty, this time for the last time. Now two years later, I wonder how I would have felt that night, knowing what I know now. Would I have lingered longer in the presence of her white brilliance, despaired so much more at her drooping, withered petals? Our home is gone. I understand the “truth” in Keats’ line “Beauty is truth, truth, beauty” to be the fleeting nature of all that I love and cherish. His “grecian urn,” with all its pipers, lovers and pastoral finery, is still a repository of ashes.

*“When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you
shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you
shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your
delight.”* *-Khalil Gibran*

* From a myth of the Tohono O’odham peoples