

**Ten Penny Players  
BardPress  
publication**

**Children**

**of**

**Light**

**a poetry novel**

**by Mary Clark**

# Children of Light

*a poetry novel*

by

Mary Clark



"The soul is a burning desire to breathe  
in this world of light and never to lose it  
— to remain children of light."

*Albert Schweitzer*

Ten Penny Players' BardPress Publication  
[www.tenpennyplayers.org](http://www.tenpennyplayers.org)

Copyright © Mary Clark 2004

*Dedicated to*  
**Robert K. Nicholas**  
*my sixth grade teacher*  
*Sarasota, Florida*

*Special Thanks to*  
Ruth Buck Clark  
*for her help with the flora and fauna of Florida*  
and Bradford Dov Lewis  
*for his encouragement*



*Illustrations by*  
Forrest Stanley Clark



Longboat Key





The setting sun casts out its netting  
catching all large and small  
sea breezes sing through a lyre of cypress  
clouds of white ibis flow into darkness  
as palms lift frayed wings into night  
the sun's last rays ignite the Gulf of Mexico  
fish mate with waves, streaming into light  
the palm of eternity, visible  
as it turns

An eagle wheels high above mangroves  
brimming into the bay  
least terns double-time  
across the glistening tidal line  
as the surf churns along the bend of shore  
the sun falls, a flamingo wing  
a glimmering curve  
revealing all  
between day and night

Waves half dark, half light leap and spin  
flashing hooves and windswept manes  
sleek black flanks and spinning wheels  
of a chariot carrying the moon  
wings of darkness flutter and fall  
palms bow and bend and arc in the wind  
as the surf sings  
strength and renewal  
strength and renewal



Across the universe night coils  
contours shimmering  
and detours sharp as a knife  
a black snake swallowing the egg of life

The sun rises a shepherd king  
herds life into greener pastures  
in petulance burns the barren tree  
in rock carves its prophecy  
walks upon the sea and toys with disaster  
blood and flesh no master  
in the dawn a greater gleam  
stronger than Einstein's beam  
and going faster

From the jaws of morning the egg  
comes wringing wet: whole, complete, inviolate  
bathed with the scent of fresh citrus  
the purest aroma of birth  
and from the fragrance of the surf  
a moment, a breath, innocence

A breath of air, a spark of light  
frolics in the surf, rises on the dunes  
crosses sand flats to deep red earth  
in sun-leavened grasses a furrow of change  
flows against the grain:  
a wake of passage

A moment in the morning grows  
and wildly a child dances calypso miles





As one unknown sees a likeness in the lake  
comes to find another in reflection  
two weave their way to connection  
a pale form flashes into a cave  
and light seeking light a child reaches out  
to draw into the sun a haloed child

The children circle about and careen  
through reefs of light and shade  
to a place overarching the sea  
and rocks parrying the waves

Along a spine of dunes they race  
calling to one another in joy they spill down  
to the final offertory of dust  
to the taste of salt and ashes



Atop a dune Leila Payson's azure eyes  
match the Gulf's galloping waves  
a mane of grass flows in a lee breeze  
chestnut and blond, copper strains

The roaring surf and rioting song  
of birds in blackberry vines drift up to her  
swelling in the cool heft of the dune:  
madness and calm all in one  
and a rich black-red wine flows down  
streaking the sand, ribbons of pain and life

On the beach two soft spokes of light  
brighter than the day  
spin along the curve of sea  
in the aurora borealis of sunrise

Miss Payson! Dia cries, Look who I found!  
A wild boy who lives alone  
What's your name? Leila asks him  
but the boy does not answer  
he hears an echo, a matching sound  
from beyond the horizon

La-ha-ta, he struggles to intone  
Leila smiles, Come back to my home  
and leads the way to a cottage  
in a dry expanse of sand and salt rye  
on the verge of infinity:  
earth, sky and a seagull's cry





A man sits at a round table  
beneath a faded blue umbrella  
Mr. Ayres! Dia shouts, I found him  
in the woods living in a cave  
Of course, says Wry  
and offers her a lemonade

The children play among sprays  
of sea oats, savior of the dunes  
What's going on? Wry asks Leila  
at the round white table in the shade  
Is he one of the children the sheriff finds  
cast off by the island bridge causeway  
children, not dogs  
once he told me found an infant  
but never the father or mother

She sighs with rage, I believe  
he's been living in a cave  
I wonder how long he's been out there  
How did he survive?



La-ha-ta! Dia calls, Come on!  
on the brink of twilight they leap  
over scattershot of sandspurs  
sea rocket and beach tea  
in the lee of dunes no breeze  
and mosquitoes stinging them numb  
through the musical scales of wind and sea  
they run on sand scarred by man  
in patterns of coming and going

On the last shoulders of the dunes  
a white house poised, as if to take flight  
its sandy lawn fringed by beach grass  
the children turn as one to the setting sun  
and the white house, the island  
and the sea fly away

The horizon is filled with fire  
wine red, burgundy and claret  
as substantial as granite, dense with heat  
into which trees sink, thin black trenches  
embalmed in fire, night-knife trimmed  
fences on the universe

Final rays lance into their sight  
and blind them:  
how incorporeal all matter can seem  
when only the vision remains to matter

Turning they see a crucible:  
the doorway in which Dia's mother appears  
She waves to them and surveys  
light-tipped reeds and deep shadow  
searching for a sign before  
she tells them, Bring him inside





Dia grips her pail and shovel  
La-ha-ta a beach ball, a puzzle  
Leila says, Let's go to the beach!  
and lifting one foot behind her  
points a beach umbrella toward a barrier  
of morning glories flung  
across hurricane molded dunes  
Charge! The light cavalry  
of childhood

Along the dunes white stilt houses  
wings folded, a line of seagulls  
facing wind and ocean  
chiaroscuro designs of light and shadow  
imprint the sand  
with patterns of yin and yang

The moist sand soothing, the air  
filled with the scent of dreams  
the Gulf changing from pastel to primary  
dunes dotted with intermittent squalls  
of sea purslane's purple flowers  
and rubbery evergreen

The high tide line is marked  
by seaweed laced with broken shells  
crabs, sharks' teeth, black skate cases  
abandoned after birth

Waves crest, turtles nest, seagulls jest  
and dolphins sport with élan  
children build castles in the sand  
and time is melded by one elemental hand

The sea chimes in, mist and spray  
on an endless plain the children see  
the Old Man framed by cascading dunes  
and rolling waves, barely visible  
tall and thin, ash-white hair a flame  
he stares at them before turning away

Did you see him? Dia asks  
The Old Man of the Island?



Air and day are born of night  
and the sweet smell of imagination's remains  
baked in the crematorium of first light  
expose the rotting decay of cedar plains



Dia stands on a cracked concrete driveway  
He must belong to someone, her mother explains,  
What if his own mother  
is looking for him? We must take him  
into town and tell the police we found him  
living in his own way

La-ha-ta runs down the road to Leila

Miss Pacer! Miss Pacer!

Leila hugs him and hands him  
new clothes. She says, My radio

Dia stands with Leila in a trance  
as the car bounces over upheavals  
of sand and grass mingled with debris  
thrown from windows or the sea  
as her mother drives away  
La-ha-ta waves through the window

Dia cuts across fields to the causeway  
of the vaulting gateway  
where a flashing amber light  
gyrates in the offshore breeze, cha-cha-ing  
above asphalt burned white by the sun  
and thin, fine ribbons of sand coil  
around her feet as the car channels  
into the fast lane and swings  
up the bridge to the mainland

Dia runs across a blazing plateau  
dodging discarded bottles, food wrappers  
and coarse copses of blue-green grass  
iridescent as dragonfly wings and rotten meat  
sparks fly from her heels  
lightning bolts into her eyes  
and like a blind, wounded animal  
she runs headlong, outside time  
into a sacrament of sea and sky

On a switchback of dunes she stumbles  
to the lip of a hollow  
where a storm surge has driven the land  
a lagoon of sand  
engulfing a grove of trees:  
they fell without a sound  
twisted roots in air  
fire caving in on fire  
yielding to fire

In the center one tree still stands  
the trunk ropelike coiling  
entwined in fierce ecstasy  
thin silken layers infused with fire:  
she reaches out to touch  
the wood as soft as flesh



The Old Man of the Island faces the sea  
body tilted to the breeze, arms lifted  
to embrace the crisp fluttering of the waves  
the jostling winds of fate

The Old Man sings, Angel of Death

Let us be lovers



His skeleton is sharpened  
the bones heightened through the skin  
I can feel the wind from your wings  
I can feel your feathery touch on my face  
Let me feel your awful embrace  
He laughs with all the humor left, all  
the human wreckage of years  
jangling together  
like bones

His body an ancient coastline  
formed by nature's remains  
by the laying down of the body  
in strata of decades, nature no less cruel  
than man, of memories only  
fossils remain

Am I invisible? the Old Man asks  
Even the Angel of Death cannot see me  
Half blind, stoop-shouldered  
an aged prophet he wanders  
I am no longer the seaman I used to be  
I wear no masks of youth or virility  
I await your kiss, I will be yours forever  
Take me away. Have mercy  
I have lived past my destiny



From a wind-racked dune Dia listens  
The Old Man turns and his voice erupts  
What are you doing up there?  
Come down, I know life interrupts

Dia navigates the dune's shifting face  
to the Old Man, now only an old man  
small and withered who wants to fly away  
to an island of peace

Have you come for your food?  
the Old Man asks and peers at her  
I thought you were that boy  
I leave food out for him  
She comes closer and tells him  
They took him away  
I was afraid of that, he says,  
now they will educate him  
out of his mind

The Old Man walks over low dunes  
stones and pieces of wood  
jut out of the sand  
Shipwreck, the Old Man says  
listing into the wind  
I knew your father when he was young  
He spent a long time with me  
fishing and clamming, sailing  
on the brim of the sea

I remember the night he died  
the Old Man tells her  
as well as anyone can remember  
Could it be we are all asleep  
as the Arab proverb says, asleep  
in a boat being swept along?





At his cabin on sand flats drifting  
into the ocean, where the island  
rides on the earth's motion  
the Old Man sits on a cedar deck  
from his checked shirt pocket  
he takes a sketchbook, opens it

Dia leafs through precise images  
of herself, her mother and father  
Leila and Mr. Ayres and others  
on the island she knows by sight  
one of a young sailor, his body a temple  
one in late life, the temple in ruins

You can have any one you want, he offers  
She chooses one, holds it up to the light  
La-ha-ta, she replies, the wild one  
as wild as me



Wild boy, wolf boy, animal and child  
his photograph belies the hunger in his eyes  
time went by and no one claimed him  
having no home, no origin  
and no memory of being  
with or without them

Leila watches fishing ships go out  
in the dawn rigging lights twinkle  
things visible in the night  
are less evident in the light  
the moon in the noon sky  
Jesus in heaven

Leila leaves the island with Dia  
on a road winding through tangles  
of storm-dwarfed oaks, sea myrtle  
mangrove mangles, palmetto pyramids

Dia gazes at coco plum cabled together  
the Indian *hicaco*, tumbling high as trees  
canoe-shaped leaves seared by salt and sun  
blisters of chalk and rust  
she knows swift currents and sudden seas  
carry its buoyant seeds

From the top of a pole an osprey  
observes the shallows, over fields  
of seaside bean's pink flowers  
a marsh hawk flies its harrowing patrol



Tarred scarred power poles slant inland  
carrying a single slack line to the horizon  
marking the road ahead, a tango  
of bend and stand on the Gulf of Mexico  
this design of storm winds  
the only sign of civilization

On a jump-frog bridge they leap  
across Sarasota Bay  
a brown pelican on a bridge railing  
drying its wings, glides away  
toward renegade mangroves forming  
their own island

And there in tangled branches  
little blue heron, yellow-crowned night heron  
black-crowned night heron, and snowy egret  
nest and raise their young



The sky rumbles in ancient rotation  
palms twirl into its Big Top  
a huge cannon in the yard  
of the Human Cannonball  
weeds sprouting about its wheels  
little people and the world's tallest man  
amble down the streets  
Emmet Kelly, the sad clown  
shops for groceries

On a spinning axis day and night  
two wheels of a chariot driven by one  
relentless and unknown  
carve lines of history into sand and concrete  
snail trails glisten on bleached sidewalks  
a palimpsest of white on white  
success and despair, prey and hawks, all  
tracings of hope and industry evaporate  
in the glare of the golden fleece sun

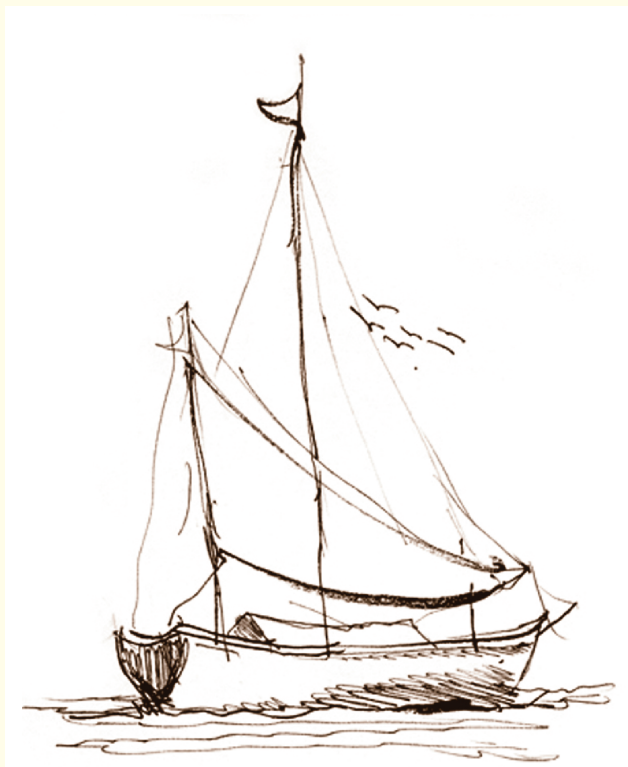
Ringling Causeway ringlings in their ears  
distillation of sand and salt rebounds  
from the highway, the Tamiami Trail echoes  
a religious monotone, pans out in the sun  
a sacrificial altar carrying chrome lambs  
to Miami, the city of Quivira

In a sun-gilt haze, Hernando de Soto  
lands with his troops  
wearing bloomers and metal tee-shirts  
clamshells on their heads:  
clowns seeking everything  
but redemption  
the concrete highway reflects them  
grasping bell-mouthed guns they march  
through the land of flowers

Cymbals clash at the courthouse  
Spanish renaissance and Spanish colonial  
with dashes of rococo  
inlaid mosaic on white stucco walls  
a red tile roof, and a bell that never tolls:  
glory past wrapped in wrought-iron fences  
peppery pink and white azaleas  
surprised red poinsettias  
dreams of old worlds, new worlds



Provincial forts, colonial towns  
Art Deco hotels and the road  
to the ball park, its sweet green smell  
joyous red and mellow orange hibiscus  
and the scent of citrus and jasmine  
a view of the bay, a white sail.



Lemon Bay



In front of the home, children play  
and the earth moves in space for all to see  
as the sky revolves around a balloon  
they have set free  
unfathomable blue sky the largest sea  
summons firefly rockets and astronauts  
so much sky for such a small planet  
children might be children under it  
adults saints or savages

Leila and Dia see La-ha-ta in a window  
as if expecting them, he waves  
a chain link fence surrounds the home  
crosshatched shadows on the lawn

Leila rings a bell, at the responding tone  
Dia unlatches the gate  
an indigo-lavender flower bends  
into her cupped hands  
one of many on a winding vine  
*Passiflora incarnata*, the Passion Flower  
Leila says, To early Spanish explorers  
this flower of the New World  
tells of the Passion of the Christ

These lobed leaves are the hands  
of His persecutors, the tendrils the whips  
the petals are ten disciples, Peter and Judas  
absent, the pistil five nails  
and five stamens five wounds  
the young seedpod is the sponge  
dipped in vinegar  
and the short stalk is the cross  
on which He was crucified

Here, she held the flower out to Dia  
the fringed center is the crown of thorns  
and the fully open flower  
weeps with nectar when in bloom



Leila greets the home's director  
Miss Payson, she says, I have come  
to visit the boy  
brought here from the island  
I called but received no answer  
and I would like to see him



The director shakes her hand  
and says, there is someone  
you need to speak to  
but the girl can't go any farther  
she will have to wait in the Florida room

Leila leaves Dia on a couch among toys  
facing the yard where children play  
the director leads her down the hall  
and she enters a shuttered room  
shades drawn down, and a figure  
rises from the gloom



They call me Diov, and I am an expert  
called in to study this child

Are you a relative?

Do you know anything about him?

I'm a friend, and I care about him  
and many people feel the same  
but I don't know where he came from  
or where he's been

I will investigate this case, Dr. Diov says  
and as his advocate and guardian  
I will decide what's best for him  
the police are trying to find his family  
In cases like this there are people  
where there has been publicity  
who claim children, but after the novelty  
and fame fade away  
they return them

She answers, I understand your reasoning  
but it has been a long time since  
he has had a home  
and someone to love him

I believe it's best no one sees him  
and that's my absolute policy  
this boy has been living in the wild  
and readjusting to his family will be a trial  
if he becomes attached to someone new  
he could become more confused

Leila says, I don't think he is  
or will be confused  
and today I would just like to see  
he has everything he needs



Certainly, you may inquire and request  
to visit him during the holidays  
We can? Leila smiles, I'm not alone  
there is a girl here to see him  
Dr. Diov waves her away  
Only you, and under supervision

Dia leans against a paneled hallway  
a skin of wood, it yields  
Leila comes in, a song drifts down  
the carpeted stairway  
on the newel post above them  
Leila's radio



Dia runs along the curve of the island  
and a fleeting ghost crab  
paler than the sand, blind in daylight  
hesitates in her path  
Dia waits by the gravelly digging tide  
sharp shadows of grass dip over dunes  
sunlight forces its way through retaining walls  
light and dark shift in an eternal  
rearranging of the planes and angles  
of the earth's surface to the sun

She waits, an intense waiting  
in which a subterranean  
and fluid reformation takes place  
and she longs for lightning to strike  
for a sudden infusion of light  
erasing all boundaries

Dia makes her way across the bridge  
the iron grill marks her passage  
halfway to the mainland  
below her feet the swift channel

Blind flashing windows on the bay  
water skiers, power boats, fishing piers  
the festival of Sarasota begins  
at the Indians' place of dancing  
where a fable of romance ends  
in concordance beneath the waves

At the group home she finds  
La-ha-ta waiting  
and they walk away while the children play  
and hide without hiding  
They move past malls and mansions  
springing up in pine forest and sand:  
permanence to mock the spirit of Florida  
its savage transformations  
and tropical tenacity



The children romp across a community  
sinking back to swamp:  
snakes nose through centipede grass  
and sky-blue toadflax around ruined homes  
and gardens, stagnant pools, crape myrtle  
fringed with poison ivy, alligators snooze  
on haunted battlefields of dollar-weed  
Springing from the worst devastation  
pure white morning glories



Moonscapes replace the sanctuary forest:  
subdivisions, golf courses, tennis courts  
on a cobbled street cobbled with queen palms  
and Spanish mission style homes  
with red bougainvillea and yellow allamanda  
fiery poinciana and pale blue jacaranda  
canary date palms on lime green lawns  
a shadow steps from shadow  
and accosts them without a sound

My name is Eric, the boy says  
I know the way  
Eric takes them to the Ringling Museum  
to play on the Roman horse and chariot  
Caesar and his warriors glued in time  
beneath the sun empires have worshipped

And here an oracle speaks to Eric:  
In exploration a child reaches out  
brain expanding, hands nimble  
desires direct and free  
A blow greets him and never  
again will the child be  
without hostility, and so  
the guilty are often in need  
of a mask of amiability

And through the years we build  
this inventory of love and hate  
yes and no, to and fro  
until the mass of one  
is greater than the other:  
Which one will it be?

Laocoon and his sons wrestle  
the water serpent eternally  
twisting in the shadows  
and fawns and kings burn away  
fountains glitter and columns shimmer  
while the children stare at perfection:  
a replica of Michelangelo's young David  
who towers above the lawn  
and gazes away from their pain



The sun browbeats with its bird's beak  
catches hearts in cottonmouth jaws  
sea and surf and sun-poisoned eyes  
plaster of Paris bodies melting  
and the children are scuba divers  
sinking from the loud barking voice  
of the sky, ghost crabs  
searching for night  
for the loss of depth perception

La-ha-ta, Eric and Dia sit under the wings  
of a tall pine, watching small motions  
in the grass: frogs, lizards, beetles and bees  
grasshoppers wingo presto  
the tata-tata-tata of woodpeckers  
echoing from far away

A sea squall's banging bass drum  
resounds with the beat of their feet  
as they race to the fairgrounds  
where shattered sun-bleached shells cascade  
to make walkways among the sideshows  
avenues of utility and waste to the Big Top



The drumbeat brings the circus in  
the sea rings against the shore  
and the Big Top flies up  
a whistle blows to stop the industrial  
complexes in its depths, an elephant  
stands on its hind legs, thunders down

The sea whisks the beach with spent foam  
reclaims its dead and wounded  
until the ocean rolls in and the tide heals  
and the sun shines back at itself:  
a planetary mirror

Life grows legs in coastal coves  
and walks out of the eddying water  
among bay mangroves  
while the wind's sigh and hum  
and the sea's simpatico thrum  
of ebb and flow go on without cease  
seeking balance: peace



sunspringsummerseasonsand  
the clowns handspring in their hearts  
through the circus of their minds  
masters of the body  
in an ocean of emotion  
as the Sailor Circus waits for the calliope  
to play, a clown somersaults  
in the silence and the circus  
passes from sight

Beneath vine-laden trees their ghostly forms  
jamboree through forest air, the shade  
deep and rich as mahogany  
La-ha-ta speeds far ahead  
he vanishes as a voice spears the air  
There they are!

Dia and Eric tumble into a deer path  
and La-ha-ta reappears  
on the trail ahead of them  
Run, Dia shouts, don't turn back!

Eric curls away, a decoy  
the voices follow him  
as Dia watches La-ha-ta turn  
toward freedom



On weathered beach stairs  
drifted with sand Dia's mother  
stands watching and waiting  
the white house on the edge of flight



She turns toward the sea  
and then inland, calling, Dia!  
weary with fear, anger and panic  
Where are you?

I'm here! Dia shouts and runs to her  
I didn't know I was going so far  
Her mother gasps, Let me know  
when you leave and where you're going  
Dia nods yes, and follows  
her mother's footsteps  
her feet falling into the large  
and widening imprints in the sand  
to the house, wings folded, facing the sea

Leila stops by and Dia hears her  
speak to her mother, soothing  
and encouraging words  
a melody of passionate compassion  
before coming to sit with Dia  
to say, We all need shoring up at times

My mother watches me, Dia tells Leila  
as if she's waiting  
Leila replies, Your mother lost the man  
she loved not once, but twice  
and when you disappeared she thought  
she might have lost it all

Leila waves and winks into night  
and with her mother Dia gazes at the stars  
as the womb of the Milky Way  
spreads its treasure across the sky



Rain slams into the house  
loosing it from its moorings  
Eric falls asleep with a sensation of flight  
a long winding scream wells up  
from the depths of the night  
courses through the rooms

His brother Simon walks across the lawn  
only deep green and bright red roses remain  
as the magic hour begins to wane  
Simon waves and enters the stone walls  
of their home, laughing and calling  
to Eric, and never to be free again

Eric rides into the night sky  
the horizon heaves to one side  
tiny lights sparkle far below  
into the darkness he falls:  
a long free fall lasting for years



He hears someone screaming  
in his brother's room, a light comes on  
as he reaches the door  
his father by the bed, his face a mask  
distorted, his hands above Simon's face  
flung back by a free fall

Sleep comes hard, dreams more easily  
Eric feels a form struggling inside  
inseparable but different, it has no energy  
and he tries to suffuse it with his own  
He wakes to find himself  
in a stark sunlit world alone



I can show you how to escape, Eric says  
but I am lost myself  
as long fingers play  
on day-glo sand and bat-shadow  
wave, warp and woof over sharp and flat:  
railroad vine reels, sea rocket rags  
sabal palm sonatas  
the cordgrass' evening tune  
reaches a crescendo

Eric and Dia and Leila ascend  
to the crest of the highest dune  
He likes to listen to one station  
on the radio, Eric says. We can request  
a song. They say who it's from and who  
it's dedicated to

Let's do it, Leila decides  
and tells them, I called again to ask  
if I could adopt him. Doctor Diov  
said he was amazed by the suggestion  
Why are you amazed? I asked  
Because he's bizarre

Eric snuggles into the sand. Bizarre?  
She muses, I told him I know some people  
beyond bizarre; I work with them  
He said I should take this seriously  
La-ha-ta's not ready to live  
in an unsupervised environment  
he needs special training  
and he's at a critical stage  
you know how sensitive children are

Wind veers up the dune, moonlight rises  
and falls on waves, rilling with a breeze  
they tune in to the station, the moon low  
on the horizon, a well of light  
behind the three listeners  
island homes sparkle

This one's for Dia and Eric  
and Miss Pacer, croons the dj  
Islands in the Stream  
Leila's laugh is music in the night





The open doors of the school, an old conch  
its pearly inner layer cracking  
peeling to purity, human skin shows through  
opens to the roar of the ocean  
July squalls and September storms  
reflected light in the parade of windows  
mimics the pure white salt-smoothed  
inner surfaces of shells, pearl of oyster shells  
which like thoughts, abstractions, slide by

As smoothly as oysters down the throat  
of tourists swallowing visions of sun and sea  
in cool dark bars slung with fishing nets  
starfish and seahorses in their webbing  
and a great blue tarpon  
semi-circling on the wall

Summer is a rose garden cooking in the heat  
the strong sweet smell rising  
dust, heat, and the desire of one's body  
its pain and its needs magnified  
caught in a vise between sky and earth  
longitudinal suffering

The plate glass sky a diamond-grinding wheel  
the mind a diamond cracked, shattering  
returning to dust, the heart  
glazed pottery  
the spirit a thin white line  
slinging through space in an arc  
knowing no destination  
only the journey  
and the drive to be free



Osceola's Plume



Berries and mangos in a nest of leaves  
signify his return, and Dia spins a net of hope  
across the island, seeks him in his old home  
stands by the lake and finds no image

In the myrtle murmurs of mourning doves  
in salt marshes mists of sea lavender  
on loamy shores roving bands of piping plovers  
on oaks waiting for rain, the resurrection fern

Dia takes fresh fruit to the Old Man waiting  
his thin pale form a ghost in the doorway  
and they sit on his battered deck  
to watch cloud fleets sail the oceans  
seeking harbor, never finding any  
only shipwreck and storm, hail on bone



Lightning flashes over waves  
and seagulls foam from the sand  
All along the deep swallow of the ocean  
from Ten Thousand Islands to Boca Grande  
from Siesta Key to Anna Maria Island  
the sea is dashed, dashed on the shore

The Old Man peers into the tumult  
*If the hail rattles, let the flowers be crushed*  
and with the flowers he went  
proud Asi-yaholo  
With the flowers they have gone  
Coacoochee, The Wildcat, Micanopy  
Amathla, Vaca Pechassie, Mulatto King  
of the Spanish Indians, Seecoffee, son of  
Emperor Brims, Billy Bowlegs and Tigertail

And with the flowers we are shredded  
ripped from our stems, recumbent, drowning  
in storm waves each of us crest and plunge  
until we are crushed, crushed and gone

In the myrtle rustlings of royal terns  
in salt marshes bursts of sea hibiscus  
on loamy shores dancing bands of sandpipers  
on oaks waiting for rain, resurrection fern



Languid charter boats on the tide  
trawl in search of pompano  
sailfish, tarpon and marlin, bonita  
and king mackerel; a wild fling  
with a stingray spices things up  
and from his shelter  
in a suffocating nest of Australian pine  
brittle in the heat, in spider's silk  
La-ha-ta sees Dia's approach

Landing on scattered branches  
with cones still attached, La-ha-ta winces  
and she rushes to him across the lot  
Let's walk on the beach, he says  
and she leads him to the gulf's bands  
of lime, jade and emerald

Coconut palms bend in a bow  
head to toe, invaders and harbingers  
of things Miami, tribune and herald  
a man splits a light brown coconut  
with a machete, offers it to them  
and they drink white wine milk

La-ha-ta notices people staring  
They look for me, and they cross  
a line of bright green seaweed  
to a refuge in black mangroves  
on spider roots above yellow-tan water  
they climb deep into its maroon shade



Periwinkles carry their whorled worlds  
fiddler crabs dance the light fandango  
horseshoe crabs ply the wet sand  
burrowing in until only their pointed tails stand

Startling double crested cormorants  
and black wing-tipped white ibis  
Dia and La-ha-ta rest in interlacing baskets  
of sanctuary, roseate spoonbills  
and mangrove cuckoos entertain  
white pelicans settle on their roof  
and far within the salt sea welter  
deep within the shelter ascends  
the song of the prairie warbler

By afternoon they face the open sea  
where red mangroves step out on roots  
dancers in bravery, holding hands  
Dia and La-ha-ta watch the tide come in  
and snook and spotted sea trout swim  
among branches submerging

Ten thousand years ago Florida came  
wringing wet from the sea  
*Eto-issalle-howerha-ta*, Trees  
with Twisted Feet, still dig in between  
protect the coastline from hurricanes  
drop their seeds to resprout  
on mudflats and reclaim the land  
as salt increases around their roots  
so does their size



A Stonehenge of palms around a park  
all space radiates from the traffic circle  
on St. Armands, in this enclosure of all  
dimensions La-ha-ta and Dia race  
to the four winds, listen to the music  
of royal palms, long sweeping fingers  
slipping past the dream, the stream of time  
Florida steps out  
a deer into a clearing

Leila calls to the children  
Eric sails in from the fringe  
of drooping palm fronds hosting  
conventions of bats

Seminole Indians talk among friends  
in woven hats and bright rickrack  
at booths selling palm hewn dolls  
and the deer grazes on St. Augustine

Laughing gulls wheel, ruddy turnstones reel  
pelicans coast on waves of air  
above Big Top swells, Forster's terns  
keep the plot to themselves  
and on the gulf a crystal sheet of explosion  
sunlight dancing, overcome with motion



They play by leagues of ocean, trekking  
over gritty pools to the concession stand  
to buy crackerjacks and popcorn  
and hear music in multi-part stereo  
while in a chrysalis of spun light  
a breeze lifts the world

From the concrete the children swim  
through sand to an ocean dream  
seeking a new land: three pieces of wood  
skim over waves, follow the tide  
three who are not proud or greedy  
but wild with discovery

In cool water three come in side by side  
Leila waits to say, Let's go out on the jetty  
the waves swell and swirl  
into every nook and cranny  
barnacles open wide  
seaweed sways with the tide

There! Dia points to a sandbar  
Let's swim out there and back again  
but Leila cautions her, Your mother's right  
you may not follow every urge

Leila drops Eric off at the causeway  
he bikes his way home, the breeze  
from the Gulf blows away  
all cause and consequence  
and he feels his destiny turning  
beneath his feet

Two explorers and their guide  
rumble through the shore town:  
a full skeleton in the sun  
salt cured wood quick to ignite  
roads scorched white  
and curbs frail as fossils



Leila watches the sunrise and the world  
white and smooth as an egg  
on the windswept dunes light and sound  
inhabit the grasses  
the way they inhabit our minds  
winds of diversion and direction

Sand bulkheads and bulrushes  
hide the stream where the infant lies  
who can show the captives the way  
into paradise



Leila rides the rushing current  
sees the flashing color and identifies it  
she reaches for Dia's hand:  
La-ha-ta was caught last night  
at the bridge  
The sheriff was waiting for him

Gently Dia puts her foot on the back of a crab  
killing it would be like playing with a toy:  
when a person dies it is important  
but not when a crab dies

She looks with hooded eyes  
into the crab's beady eyes  
the moment pauses in time  
it can wait infinitely  
a great blue heron, one leg tucked up  
staring out across the marsh

She lets it go, the sea  
whistles back in relief  
washes in again  
she hears its sound rolling along  
miles of beach and wonders  
if the crab thought she was evil  
thinking what she had:  
it had looked at her  
knowing all



Diov told me this is where he is  
but denied me the privilege  
of visiting him  
Leila walks to the chain-link fence  
here our friend is being detained  
as a menace

A barren block building painted gray  
and from an open doorway  
boys thunder into dust  
windows high above the fray  
Leila points to the stone stairway  
where La-ha-ta stands alone

What's that he's got in his hand?

That's my radio, Leila says,

on three, let's all wave and jump around

La-ha-ta laughs and comes down

Dia shows La-ha-ta his portrait  
taken from the pages of the Old Man  
He pulls a drawing from his shirt  
one of Dia and one of Leila Payson  
Who did that? Leila asks  
The Old Man, they say in unison



La-ha-ta returns to the doorway  
Eric begins to turn away, Don't look  
but Leila says, No, I want to look  
I want to see him as often as I may

The new bridge channels them back  
breezes sweep across the bay  
twirling the fishing lines  
the sun's lasers shaft over the keys  
reflected in the waves one after another  
wind whistles across their crests  
a multitude of songs  
fishermen stand motionless in pools  
lamplight and longings



Sea sound of an amusement ride  
a carousel of waves  
silhouette schools of tiny fish  
as they angle to invisibility  
Glancing up Eric sees a shadow glide  
fluttering long silky wings  
weaving in and out, his father  
absent, an enemy or stranger  
always in mid-flight

Horses and cowboys materialize  
and dematerialize in a shell of sun  
sending up dew in his memory:  
there were, under glass  
ponies sparkling  
lathered with cream  
and at the day's end  
his brother Simon walking  
across the lawn

The dune homes hover like kites:  
for Eric a bright ghost is rising  
gliding in the stream  
seeking recognition



The sky is grainy and marbled, smoke rising  
Fire! Dia shouts to Eric  
and they dash across the island  
jump Wry Ayres' cactus fence

Wry is on his patio with a pot of geraniums  
It's the old Hutton house!  
Fire engines drive across his lawn  
willy-nilly into the woods  
Perfectly good road into the place!  
he roars and begins righting the cacti

A black hull explodes through the trees  
Dia and Eric advance to see  
flames gust and leaves fly  
A large frame house lifts its wings:  
Dia, Eric, Wry and the world  
Levitate; crackling, the house balances  
prim as a ballet dancer, and then subsides



The sheriff pulls into Wry's driveway  
What's new? Seen anything unusual?  
Cloudy and hot today, Wry responds  
Came on sudden

Did you hear an explosion?

No, more like a big sigh

Won't be anything left, the sheriff notes

A shame, Wry says, it was once one  
of the fine old houses on the island

Smoke rises as memories flare  
and disappear, and black silky motes  
rain down, while the wind scatters  
ashes with a soft sound

Although the Huttons were spooky  
Wry tells Dia and Eric, moon-flitters  
drove me crazy always sneaking around  
I was sure they were burying bodies!  
I heard screaming and running around  
howling and large hoofed animals —

Dia laughs: Miss Pacer says you exaggerate  
Eric takes a stance in front of them  
You shouldn't joke about death  
Why not? Wry confronts him with a grin  
Because Miss Pacer told me  
we all go toes up one day  
How cheerful, Wry pauses for breath  
But hey, join me now in an end of fire  
break dance

As evening falls, Dia asks Wry

Did you know my father?

Wry answers, Your father was a good  
friend, and he and the Old Man and I  
spent many days fishing on Lemon Bay  
or in Midnight Pass, or far off the coast

Often he sailed too far into the Gulf  
lost two boats and damaged one  
Two and a half times shipwrecked  
Then the Old Man loaned him  
his ancient yacht, and before dawn  
I saw him leave the marina alone  
He waved to me and sailed on  
to set his course by the sun  
on the deepest blue channel

And time sailed on with all of us  
floating on the surface like boats  
in an accidental regatta:  
all was pace and rhythm  
and time suspended by loss of place  
in a circling dance of accident  
he sailed far beyond the present, always  
past and future, always present  
in coincidental disaster

Dazzling, all bright, the horizon  
until there is no horizon  
only light and lightning  
waves heightening, gaining speed  
and bearing, a cat's paw  
drove him into the storm  
And sea mist covered the mystery  
only to burn away, exposing the deepest  
blue channel



Time stayed on shore while all of us  
released into the safety of past and future  
came too late to the rescue  
Sea birds driven down and drowned  
and crafty creatures of the depths  
unleashed, came to us in ragged fleets  
but still we searched on  
by land and by sea, for an arbitrary point  
defined, and not, by space and time

Circling around we came again  
to the point of departure  
to an incident both timeless  
and transitory  
and on a sandy strand we did find  
binnacle and bow, rudder and radio  
and him, a broken shell  
and the wheel  
still gripped in his hand



Point Lonesome



Morning comes, a surprise  
morning glories on the highway  
La-ha-ta hands the guard his radio  
and slips from sight  
an eagle circles high above mangroves  
the sun is on the rise

A shrouded form in mist glows  
and sadly a child  
walks away from sight  
from all that riles, from rules and styles  
promises and deals  
buying low, selling high  
homes in rows, humanity in a boat  
rowing toward death, asleep, asleep  
while God and free will play roulette



In the wheel of the sky  
Dia sees a flash of wings  
she moves forward in time with ease  
steps toward the present future  
with the dignity and grace of a Sandhill crane  
she is primitive in the modern world  
a survivor and soul-catcher at the gate

Come with me, he asks, come as far  
as you can, I know you need to be free  
but Dia replies, I will go when I believe  
it's meant to be



The whomph-a-whomph of traffic  
on the Tamiami Trail  
fades on Bahia Vista to the county line  
across the river to Pinecraft  
a Mennonite town:  
dirt roads in a grove of live oaks  
wood homes built off the ground  
women in white caps  
bearded men in black



Netted into air and night a white  
church exposed to the full measure  
of sunlight, an exploding nova  
a throng spills away, a flock of suns play  
through lush robust explosions  
of wax myrtle and locust berry  
give rise to galaxies of Florida elm  
cabbage palm, saw palmetto  
and high-climbing cross vine

La-ha-ta and Dia step around blue flag  
a lavender iris  
along ranch roads barbed wire fences  
cattle graze on bahia grass, sleep  
beneath the pines, stand shoulder deep  
in ponds, on their sharp-edged spines  
white birds with yellow crests:  
cattle egrets swept over the ocean  
from Africa to Brazil to the U. S.

Where celestial lily's flowers open  
violet-blue at noon  
farms of lettuce, cabbage, celery  
beans, peppers and tomatoes  
the migrant workers camps, wood shacks  
sitting lopsided in mud fields in rows  
without doors, windows without glass  
rotting mattresses, outhouses  
and no electricity

Florida is a surface drawn out by light  
on which people engrave  
their expectations of paradise  
Florida, surfaces of a million dreams  
of millionaires and migrant workers dreams  
below the looting surface of the sky

Thick earth-blood smell of mud  
fills her frame of mind, connects with  
her body as Dia picks strawberries  
growing wild by the roadside

A Mennonite farmer and his wife  
give them slices of watermelon  
fresh from the vines  
they fill their canteens with sulfur water  
and rest in the shadow-dome  
of freewheeling slash pines

Celestial lilies begin to close  
roses pale, hibiscuses fail  
the dove and the eagle doze  
Dia turns back to the island  
and La-ha-ta stands in a wide swale  
at his feet white-petaled innocence



Point Lonesome on the rim of a creek  
a great white heron raises its beak



Cardinals and catbirds populate the night  
a cloud's passing shadow marks his flight  
a moment's pause, a change of direction  
La-ha-ta moves into a deserted ocean

Bone Valley rich with fossils  
from Bartow to the dark sands of Venice  
a coastline littered with banks of shells  
broken eggshells of another world  
burial grounds of forgotten civilizations  
swept beneath the sea

At La-ha-ta's feet a white flower  
the nettle Tread Softly  
the day flows by, sand in a river  
fragments melded into imprints of time:  
fossilized pine, megaladon shark's teeth  
bones of mammoth and mastodon  
three-toed horse and saber tooth tiger  
a history lost and found  
in phosphate mines



Doctor Diov says, he's dangerous  
he will incite others to live  
a different way, he's becoming  
more than a man, a legend

The sheriff says, you made him famous  
his face is on posters and coffee mugs  
he is everywhere  
and nowhere

It puzzles me how he eludes every trap  
I must have him in my possession  
how deep is the design of human nature?  
that is my interest, my obsession  
I am offering a reward for information  
leading to his arrest  
and it's up to you to snap to  
and do everything to bring him in  
or I'll write you up in my reports

The sheriff retorts, I'm not of the opinion  
I'm one of your hired thugs  
and I have better ways to spend my days  
than chasing strays  
he shrugs, your obsession  
is of no importance



Boys circle around chanting  
Wolf Boy! Wild One! Come on!  
you're supposed to be strong!  
we hear you can't think  
you can't sing  
you're a freak, a thing



You know, La-ha-ta says, what you do  
is cruel, there's no reason to fight  
and always a way to do right  
Whoa! He speaks!  
Defend yourself! Fight back!  
their fists smash into him, feet  
kick him when he's on the ground  
He looks like a donkey. Let's ride him.  
Jump on and take him down!

You will grow bored with this  
La-ha-ta says, you will find it's never  
a new day, but always the old one  
over and over, one day  
you will come to your senses  
and be filled with bliss

You're weird, a sissy, we'll beat you  
senseless, don't worry about us  
there'll never be a consensus  
among humans, it's our nature

You are not to say what is your nature  
only to discover it in your blindness  
admit it, you're beginning to grow less  
interested in this adventure

The rider jumps to the ground  
threatens, in this world you won't go far  
a man rushes in, throws him down  
the boys swerve away  
the man confronts one who has fame  
but no certain name  
I recognize you, you look familiar  
don't I know who you are?  
where are your mother and father?

La-ha-ta pauses to consider  
I can say Miss Pacer  
she will come to help me  
but he can only answer, They're gone

Get back, the man says to his sons  
Let him go. To La-ha-ta he cautions  
Don't come back this way  
Leave us alone

La-ha-ta limps from the glade  
finds little shade, falls into a stream  
and begins to wade, a blistering band  
a sheet of heat, he sinks into the glow  
of liquid fire, gives himself to the flow:  
a fish swims into his hand



He crawls from the river to safety  
in a shed lays down in the hay  
wakes to eat and sits by the fire  
the setting sun catches his desire  
no match for his flame  
his inner choir

He tastes salt in the air, ashes  
in the night, drinks the bitter water



Inside the Big Top spots of light  
sound and motion fill the dark sea  
Dia joins the others and they climb  
the ladder in pairs

She swings up on the platform  
catches the bar on the upswing  
holds it shoulder high, feels its weight  
she soars across the Big Top in a steady arc:  
all space in the universe awaits  
flyer and catcher in perfect harmony

On the backswing she lets go  
the spare equipment flying away  
the distribution of weight in her body  
rearranges, sound flows up in fluted pillars  
and the warm dome of the circus tent  
rushes up to the sky

The calliope pounds in the open air  
a crazy pulsing heart  
she walks along a tightrope  
climbs a movable ladder  
and soars into the future  
on the universal flying trapeze of love



La-ha-ta pauses, they are gone  
they are gone  
blue jays call out an alarm  
the air sinks to the ground  
there is no sound  
in the stillness he climbs to the sky  
overcast as far as the eye can see  
in the distance trees thrash in the wind  
a cloud mesa engulfs the horizon

Gravity of heat meets the speed  
of light, conflagration, white  
fleets of snowy egrets  
witness the burning pyre



He finds a downed tree on high ground  
rustles the branches, a fox sprints away  
he pulls fallen limbs closer  
and thatches the shelter with palmetto

There is no sky, only wind and rain  
grey and green, trees shaking, breaking  
smashing, crashing surf breaking  
the young boughs of trees

Oaks whiplash, pines crack  
palms kiss the ground  
body and mind feel the strain in every limb  
he holds onto branches, digs deeper  
and places his hands over each drawing:  
Leila and Dia and one of the Old Man

The sky clears, the sun reappears  
the sky is an eye and he is inside  
seeing eternity blink by:  
the purest vision of infinite ecstasy  
the center passes  
things fall to the ground

As the eye closes the wind strives to find  
the grain, split the world apart  
and he seeks to place this in his mind  
as rain stings, branches, bark  
and leaves slash, vines lash his body and  
face  
climbing cactus catches his legs and arms  
he stumbles, falls into the mire  
plunges into barbed wire:  
civilization



The hurricane a great white shark  
descending, swallows everything  
in its way, sucks out sand  
water, air, explodes on land  
slices of shark flesh thud against  
dunes and homes, sea foam in drifts  
teeth in the wind  
spews out boats, fish, trees  
memories

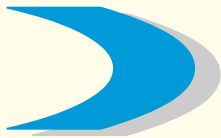
Sarasota Bay runs the wrong way  
emptiness ravages Leila's eyes  
the song of lost children  
the wreckage of nature and civilization  
lies before her, soiled and matted  
the earth is being uncreated, undone

Waves claw and hurl jetty rocks  
into the shark's maw  
It's not everyday you see  
the water run the wrong way  
Wry turns to Leila to say  
Leila gazes at the empty bay  
I wonder if he's okay  
Wry puts his hand on her shoulder  
He knows how to find shelter



The Old Man refuses to leave  
Wry shakes his head, he'll go  
I know what to say  
everyone wants the same:  
to die with no terror  
no pain

Poor Jesus, she says  
I hope he didn't die in vain  
Wry laughs, I find the sad humor  
in everything, but some exclaim  
his death was just a divine game  
to make us see God again

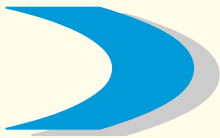


A brisk breeze snaps over the bay  
a pavane for the human race  
for all creatures of land, sea and air  
The bridge is open, evacuees rush in

Shocked to the bone, subdued  
they remove the dead, gather the broken  
the odor of decaying shark flesh  
deepens, a suffocating lace  
and a fixed mesh sinks in to homes  
and land to form a sedimentary  
record of pandemonium  
and in the wind resounds the refrain  
of a divine pavane

Leila hears the knock on her door  
a face from before the hurricane  
Show me or tell me, Diov says  
where he can be found  
I will take him back to the home  
and after I'm done I will arrange  
for you to have custody  
What will be left of him  
she asks, after you're done?

Wry's drawl answers Leila's call  
Leave it to a bureaucrat  
to exchange a life worth living  
for a prison



Eric rides his favorite horse  
following the curve of the shoreline  
a winged reflection in slow motion  
speeds over a sun-flecked ocean  
tracing a curve in recollection  
as time bends through human connection  
the way light bends through the universe  
In a display of human intuition  
place and time become one

The Old Man crosses Eric's path  
in small dunes casting this way and that  
Eric dismounts, holds his horse  
and imbues the air with leather and sweat  
You're the old man who spoke to me  
in the garden



The Old Man waits, points to the path  
and says, I have to keep moving  
or I lose my balance  
Eric joins him: It's peaceful out here  
Is that why you like it?

The Old Man smiles: In time alone  
time releases its grip, space relaxes  
and we drift beyond the net  
beyond storm, waves and shipwreck

I have come to rest in my private harbor  
where exists only the gentlest embrace  
of the undertow of death  
the riptide of change

In our private harbor we give safe haven  
to all fishers, traders and warriors  
we are keepers of the watch  
and from here we launch  
our fishing trawlers, merchant fleets  
and ships of war

In solitude the preparation begins  
for birth, for marriage, for death  
I'm preparing myself, in loneliness  
for the crucial combat  
the final union, the last breath  
What are you preparing yourself for?

Revenge, Eric blurts out  
The Old Man sighs, punishment  
for the guilty and innocent alike  
for the weary and the dead

I think it's justice, Eric replies  
and in his eyes lie the blinding stain  
of the certain who are always right  
who know no fault, no doubt  
because convinced of their innocence  
no matter what they do, or its consequence

You see it's all memory, the Old Man says  
Everything we just talked about is only  
a memory now  
What did I say? What do you recall?  
What will you remember  
tomorrow, or a year from today?



Look around, there's no one here  
but an old man about to die  
Do you hear the Gulf calling?  
the dimmed wind?  
You can speak here, I often do  
and no one hears your cry

I saw my brother the night he died  
Eric confides, a scream woke me  
from my dream, and I ran to his room  
to see my father in moonlight  
standing over him, his hand on Simon's face  
He saw me and pulled away

I'll never forget the look on his face  
as I came in  
The Old Man contemplates this  
You mean your memory of what you saw  
but yes it could be murder, a choice  
Was he with Simon every night?

Eric sighs, he spent hours at his bedside  
The Old Man raises his head:  
Watching his son suffer; how long before  
he put his hand down, in despair  
and at that moment Simon died  
or was it a moment after?

It could have happened either way  
Eric acknowledges, but does he know?  
And how can I?  
Every day I see that moment in his face

Your father died that night  
dead from an overcharge of guilt  
the shock of his own intention  
Do you intend to follow him?



Immokalee

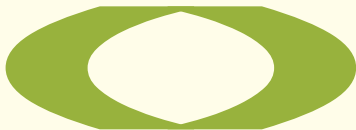


Leaves dip and swing, dark coils  
of rope slithering, follow along the grain  
they travel at a speed as fast as he  
but cold and agile  
La-ha-ta wonders at the reversal of light  
its sudden flight, loss of spark and pattern



An absence he finds unfathomable  
as a spider's web is ripped apart  
by his flight, with every movement  
he comes to sense the hunter's scent  
the air is elastic, bitter  
he rests beneath a mastic tree  
milk bleeds from its torn flesh  
a sticky sap, the smell of a trap  
in its malodorous shadow

He kneels in crushed weeds to touch  
a form immobile, incongruous  
a blood knot in the meadow's flow  
a child's body asunder and akimbo  
He feels heat flush his face  
and flees in grief this landscape of waste



Over sand flats the Old Man raves  
sunlight cresting on waves  
the truth is out along the borders  
roving the island seeking new quarters

A twisted morass bars his direction  
black thistle, buckthorn, palm rife  
with full-throated glory songs  
plundering triumphant cries of raptors  
roam above his outstretched arms  
and a rhapsody of warblers and wrens  
weave around him as he traces  
the hammock's periphery in rapture  
full of solace, full of unrest

From the magic circle the echo  
of a willet's scream, will it, will it  
and the royal terns' call to arms  
full of unrest, full of solace

He hears the siren call of eternal pathos  
as branches scrape above him adagio  
but there is no way into, no path  
worn through

The Old Man cups his ears to capture  
the final alarm, the timeless song  
Let it go! Dia hears him sing  
Let the tide go out and memory recede

Dia helps him carry driftwood  
lift it onto the deck of his cabin  
What does it look like? she asks  
and he replies, It looks like what it is  
I heard you praying, she confides  
Why don't you want to live?



I was seized in the war, sentenced  
to death, with another man  
we were held in a prison ship  
and I thought, this is it  
this is death by chance  
There was no escape  
while the other man waited quietly  
for death, I struggled in such a way  
as to make me seem guilty

But that is not my tragedy  
I was exchanged for another  
and from captive to captain  
I became commander, reborn  
into a new identity, a captain  
of destiny, fisher of sons

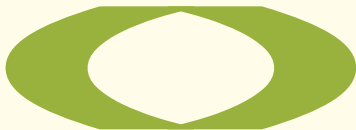
Months later we were hit  
by a deepwater explosive  
I saw the blood-rain, felt the sting  
of lost wings; I was singed  
when the fire rose  
to obscure the sun

In a raucous roar and purging flash  
the smoke of ancestors plumed into sky  
I saw my men explode in fire  
Some were swept away  
some went down within  
and some were never found

I was going down with my ship  
and I thought, this is it  
this is death by drowning  
when a hand reached out to save me  
I screamed no, no! and did resist  
but they were too many

And too strong in their conviction  
The Old Man's smile is wry  
I survived! Through no fault of my own  
and no fault of others I was condemned  
to inhabit the shell of a man  
who is now a stranger

I am not one man but two  
the one before, the one after  
The two cannot be reconciled  
So, with my ghost eyes I see  
the choice  
between two lives



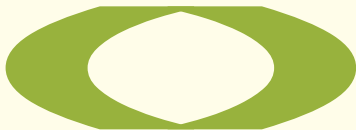
Morning comes, a surprise  
scarlet morning glories on barbed wire



Nestlings born in spring call  
to parents blasted to the ground  
La-ha-ta weeps until nightfall, sleeps  
in the fold of eternity  
and from its wing  
he rises

Corpses float, corpses of land  
in sheets of water  
he lashes fallen pines  
with muscadine vines  
eats the grapes of wrath, makes a raft  
grabs palms with his hands  
tears them down  
his palms bleed, his arms quiver  
as he lays his body down

Bruised and broken he sinks  
into cool ponds of palm fronds  
and drifts on the surging tide  
of the Peace River



Moonlight gleams on green thorn-ribbed  
cactus vines twining around palms  
along ponds and rivers white flowers  
each one a grail of glistening petals  
hold a cross in a sea of sunshine  
night blooming cereus, queen of the night

Leila follows the double stream  
into the mists of Lake Okeechobee  
alligators bark, deer watch her pass  
savannahs of fog and grass gleam  
down a winding trail to the town  
of Immokalee

Beneath a vista of stars glowing  
on the silent street, always flowing  
she sees a deputy's stars  
as he pilots a man to jail

Against her face the silky strain  
of a spider's web, netting  
of disaster, her heart pounding  
she opens the door  
and steps into her fear  
of here and now

In the half light of the cell, a half man  
bland and blank in face and manner  
wearing a too-perfect cloak of innocence  
a tee shirt with an image  
of the Wolf Boy running in the frame  
of a full moon

.



Who is he? she gasps  
We caught him chasing a boy  
who led him into our grasp  
but before our eyes the boy  
faded like smoke in the wind  
my other deputy is on his trail

She turns from the blank presence  
in the cell to tell the deputy  
I've been traveling for three days  
looking for a child

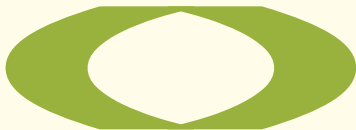
Leila walks the street to the end  
and comes to a lake fringed by time  
she reaches up to touch the useless fruit  
of a pond apple, and feels the weight  
of the grappling hook of fate  
and the antidotal surge of rage

In the quiet she hears a voice traveling  
at a constant speed and she turns to see  
La-ha-ta emerge from the trees  
not alone but with a deputy  
she embraces him with a cry of relief  
I can't stand the separation  
Are you his mother? asks the deputy  
Leila answers, We've been at a distance  
but we're family

The man offers his hand  
My name is Benjamin, your son  
or your friend helped us catch  
a killer on the run, but I must be true  
to my profession. He turns to La-ha-ta  
and asks him for his full cooperation

La-ha-ta removes the contents  
of his pockets, seeds, nuts and renderings  
of Leila, Dia and The Old Man  
Benjamin hands Leila her portrait  
and he studies the face of the Old Man  
I know him, he relates  
from the Florida straits  
and I know a place  
where you will be safe

Morning comes, a surprise  
pond apples by a lake  
shines on a forgotten colony  
as in prehistoric days:  
from the ancient hand of night  
the blossoming out of trees



Dia runs to Leila's home shouting  
We're leaving! My mother's had enough  
our home is beyond repair  
the roof is leaking, the floors warped  
she says there's nothing worth saving  
we're going to Orlando



Orlando, rising from the intensity of progress  
a new interstate through the center  
connecting east and west  
the uncontainable city  
attracting thousands of young families  
looping out to encircle  
broad shallow lakes, old airfields  
dairy farms, citrus groves and ranches  
with necklaces of single family homes

Crickets in the peppergrass  
cicadas in the sage  
out of the swamp blooms Orlando  
on dairy farms spotted cows roam  
and everything comes to the edge  
seeking more space

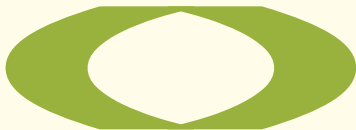
Before Dia's eyes gulf fritillaries  
flicker in waves of flame vine

Rabbits bound, turkey vultures scrounge  
armadillos burrow in sand mounds  
black bears climb, great horned owls  
sleep blind above capillaries of quarry  
in pools of shade, lakes of light  
turkeys hunt for acorns  
quail straight line across an open field  
and she finds the quill of a porcupine

She hears the shrill Florida scrub jay  
and Bachman's sparrows trill  
the limpkins wail and mockingbirds' cabaret  
high above their benign song  
the eagle flies miles each day  
in search of prey

From the hinterland of Arcadia  
the hardwood forest once flourished  
toward the legendary beauty of Ocala  
cypress, hickory, sweet gum and black tupelo  
grew along the free flowing Oklawaha  
from Palatka to Silver Springs

In the 1930s a plan for a Trans-Florida  
canal dammed up the river's flow  
the huge trees were flooded  
the Oklawaha teeming since the Ice Age  
with birds and wildlife became a parody:  
the canal was never completed



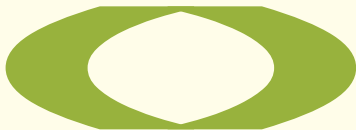
Morning comes, a boxed gift from the sun  
ribbons of light float down through royal palm  
sunshine on slender fronds as they tower  
into the core of the Tropical Zone



These are Florida's largest native palms  
Ben tells him, stripped from the Everglades  
in the Roaring Twenties  
from Bear Lake Mound, Seven Palm Lake  
and East Cape Sable; today they grace  
the streets of Fort Myers and Miami

Mahogany Hammock, Fakahatchee Strand  
and Paradise Key and the home of our band  
are all that remain  
of nature's last stand

Florida silver palms ethereal glow  
celestial lily, silky camellia, wild hydrangea  
wild indigo, wild cotton and wild coco  
beach star and saltmarsh mallow  
leafy vanilla, lemon vine, Indian pumpkin  
the Geiger tree's cluster of marmalade flowers  
giant air plants and fuzzy-wuzzy air plants  
night-scented orchids, dancing lady orchids  
rain lilies, all in danger of extinction



A promise in the center grows  
and in the air a thrall  
a sandhill crane's gatekeepers call  
echoing along a stream  
finds La-ha-ta lingering  
beneath mangos  
he sees the branches alight  
with malachite butterflies  
and wakes from his everglades dream

Across the Caloosahatchee River  
around the sugar mills of Clewiston  
to the citrus trains of Dundee  
and the Kissimmee River prairie

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! ringing  
from the Singing Tower  
above rolling seas of grapefruit  
orange, lemon and tangerine  
singing psalms of coral gables  
cypress gardens, rainbow springs  
Spanish galleons lost to reef and storm  
and conquered conquistadors:  
singing songs of gold

La-ha-ta steps from behind a tree

I know the way, he exclaims

Dia laughs, When I speak you hear me  
and appear before me; when you speak, I  
know you; I brought you into this world  
once and now again

He tells her, I can tell you all  
and I know you understand  
They feel the inviolable thread  
stronger than circus rigging  
on which they will always be swinging  
a cherished pattern of coming and going



I will wait for you to come to me  
I came to tell you I'm safe  
I have a home  
and most important, I am not alone

And Dia says, even though I am able  
to give physical birth, a miracle  
given and shared  
in my heart and soul I am free  
to be both here and there



Time bends through human connection  
the way light bends through the universe  
slinging through space in an arc  
carrying a covenant

Two lines parallel but not the same  
each a distinct position and perception  
lead the way to the same intersection  
and flow through time  
scalloped by gravity, arced by magnetism  
to reach a flashing correlation, pulsing  
with random certainty  
as chance is the greatest likelihood:  
birth, life and death all in a day's roulette

The universe expands in a paradise  
of light, ample light  
touching all horizons, light and time  
changing pitch and intensities  
until it is possible to see eternity  
in each moment  
as time enthralled  
time current and time to come  
ride the arc as one



Captiva Pass



Morning comes, a surprise  
sea hibiscus yellow at first light  
blood red at noon  
scarlet hibiscus on the bank of a swamp  
marsh mallow pink and high on the stalk:  
the roses of eternity

The play of light in all its variations  
in laurel cherry and long leaf pine  
gives way to sweet bay and railroad vine  
as Dia travels in a pure straight line  
to Leila, the Old Man and the island  
the center of all designing



The Hutton house a wrecked ship  
risen to the surface of the sea  
floating sacrificially, twisted steel  
and blackened beams

Rain falls on the white house  
the Old Man's cabin, Leila's bungalow  
as Dia watches the sun come and go  
serene, muted, among clouds

With an incendiary burst the sun  
fills the sky, fires the rhythmic sea  
and Dia is swept away  
by the frail transience of reality

The Old Man says, I thought you forgot me  
she laughs, you know I would not  
and she helps him sweep sand from his home  
a shipwreck that smells of wind and sea foam

Dia asks Leila, where is he?  
and Leila smiles, I'll tell you the way  
Dia runs along the shoreline's wide  
and graceful swing into the sea  
swept along by a tide quick as fire  
In the darkness she feels light as light



Night swimmers in the phosphorescent sea  
at Naples by the fishing pier  
on Sanibel Island beaches luminescent  
with angels wings  
Eric rests in the fold  
of high curved banyan roots  
where gravity takes hold  
and takes in the sea roll  
of the Gulf of Mexico

In the bend of Captiva Island  
Eric meets his friend  
and he says, I want to live  
among the people you have found  
and who have found you  
to give myself up to a life-swoon  
but La-ha-ta tells him  
your light is sea and wind  
and carves its own path within

Eric asks, aren't you angry  
at having been abandoned  
having no parents, no home?  
La-ha-ta says, I was abandoned  
and I will be again  
perhaps I needed no home  
no mother or father  
but what have I overcome  
compared to you?



Eric feels Dia's hand on his shoulder  
he says, you have always been strong  
she answers, I considered the possibility  
I might be wrong and threaded my guilt  
through my innocence  
until this quilt was all around me

This is the quilt many wear, rightly  
but even though you are wound tightly  
you know deep inside the cocoon  
the ultimate truth:  
the birth of the soul  
has no mother or father



On an island cast away like a stone  
from the Everglades two walk alone  
through mounds of shell and bone  
where pioneers from another zone  
build homes on the ruins  
of a past civilization

Violet clouds roll overhead  
glare fills the air, clouds and sky  
and the rain explodes in fire  
Speedboats roar into shore, slice  
into sand and more: into flesh and bone  
drive the doctor and his men  
casting two bodies into tall grass  
flecks of blood, flakes of gore  
make angels' wings on the sand

Dia's eyes open to somber radiance of rain  
amber veils of light, dazzling pain  
she fights to rise and finds La-ha-ta  
prone and dying

A sailor, a hired man kneels on the beach  
the doctor stands back, beyond reach  
and says, he's no use to me dead  
carry them both to the boats, head back  
to the coast, there's a strong wind  
blowing in from the open Gulf

Roaring motors surround her drowning  
out song and surf, on the horizon closing  
fast clouds unfurl, emerald waves curl  
colors of the sea knit blue and purl green  
thunderheads mass as the boats veer  
into the pass

This is what it comes down to  
all actions count for nothing  
Is there no more she can do?  
she wants to leap into the sea  
Is she like the Old Man?  
Has she lived past her destiny?  
she leans down to kiss his cheek  
when she hears him speak  
I'm very much among the living



He rises as if freed from a dream  
leaps into the stream  
and in the moment terror flows  
through her as the men scream  
Why am I here among enemies?  
she throws herself into the deep blue

And in the storm they're lost  
a glimmering curve reveals all  
battered shells' translucent bouquet  
and gentle rainfall at end of day



The setting sun casts out its netting  
catching all large and small  
sea breezes sing through a lyre of cypress  
clouds of white ibis flow into darkness  
as palms lift frayed wings to night  
the sun's last rays ignite the gulf:  
fish mate with waves, streaming into light  
the palm of eternity, visible  
as it turns

No one sees them hold tight  
to aerial tightropes, roots of mangroves  
rock with the rowdy surf  
nest in coco plum, rest in banyan  
and walk from limb to limb  
gumbo limbo

On the plains of memory  
circus tents stand empty  
canopies of the heart  
wind-lifted wings reveal inner stages  
storm winds rush in  
shifting perspectives, currents of change  
the circuitous circle  
the three-ring circus:  
birth, life, and death

In a matter of time they will know  
that we did survive  
and now we must decide to go  
back together into the fire  
or stay together in separate harmony  
or only you or only I

You decide  
what they decide

The End



Mary Clark's childhood experiences on the Gulf Coast of Florida inspired her to write *Children of Light*.

After graduating from Rutgers-Newark College of Arts & Sciences, she moved to New York City. She was the director of the Poetry Festival at St. Clement's Episcopal Church, and later executive director of a neighborhood organization and a community newspaper.

Her poetry has appeared in *The Archer*, *Lips*, *East River Review*, and *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream*.

**A Ten Penny Players Publication**  
**[www.tenpennyplayers.org](http://www.tenpennyplayers.org)**  
**2014**