

MISSING THE TREES

- Diane Elayne Dees

When I finally leave Louisiana, I will not really miss the music or the festivals or even the world-famous cuisine. Somehow, I will find a way to get along without the almost intoxicating Creole tomato. Leaving the trees, however, will be another story.

When you live here, it is easy to take the trees for granted. The giant oaks, towering pines, dramatic cypress, and sprawling tupelos are so much a part of the landscape, we sometimes see them without really seeing them at all. In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," Walt Whitman says of the oak that "it grew there uttering joyous of dark green," and that its look was "rude, unbending, lusty."

In his lovely book, *Heartwood: Meditations on Southern Oaks*, photographer William Guron pairs his photographs of Louisiana oaks with poems by the 13th Century Persian mystic, Rumi. This may sound like an odd idea, but the trees, heartbreakingly beautiful in their lines and shadows, make perfect companions for the Sufi's words. "Where is...an eye that deserves to look at trees?" the poet asks, and on the opposite page is a photograph of a huge, ancient oak whose branches appear to reach out to an entire community of readers as well as nearby residents.

A boat ride through a Louisiana swamp is gratifying, even without the presence of the alligators, waterfowl and stands of deep blue native iris and

swamp rose mallow which delight visitors. It is gratifying because of the sculptural display of cypress knees amid the whimsy of tufts of Spanish moss, which look like swamp scarves draped casually among the oaks. Bald eagles nest in the swamp trees, as do egrets, and the unforgettable roseate spoonbill. If you go to the swamp at the right time of year, the sky is washed white with egrets, traveling furiously from tree to tree, carrying large strands of nesting materials.

I grew up among Louisiana pines, cypress, tupelo, sweetgum, and a large variety of oaks. The redbud trees in front of our house were startling in the richness of their color and the volume of their blooms. At Christmas, my father painted sweetgum balls and pine cones, inserted hooks in them, and used them for tree ornaments. Persimmon trees grew at the edge of our vegetable garden, and they multiplied into an entire grove when the garden was eventually abandoned. When those trees bore fruit, *they* were as bright and colorful as a Christmas tree.

On Saturday, my father would sometimes take me fishing in his boat. I was young when I learned that a log is not always a log, but sometimes an alligator. For a little girl, navigating among the treacherous cypress knees and alligators-in-disguise was as thrilling as the adventure movies I devoured on television. For school projects, I would preserve and shellac a dozen types of oak leaves and display them in a book.

I now live in what is known as the piney woods region of southeast Louisiana. That designation, however, has been rendered obsolete by the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Hundreds of pines fell during Katrina, and hundreds more had to be taken down because they were damaged and likely to

fall at any moment. The rotting trunks were not removed in a timely fashion, for one reason or the other, and so pine bark beetles came in droves, feasting not only on those trunks, but on every pine they could find. As a result, hundreds more pines had to be taken down.

Fear was the saw that took down hundreds more. Residents looked out their windows, saw healthy pine trees precariously close to their roofs, and called on the tree crews to remove them. Some had every pine in their yards removed. I now see my neighbors' yards for the first time, and I would much rather see the pines.

Even without the help of Katrina, the pines—and other trees—were coming down at a rapid rate. Out-of-control construction has driven deer and rabbits onto the highways, and birds and squirrels in search of new homes. Our owl has gone away forever, and I will never again go to sleep while listening to its steady and reliable call.

In New Orleans, the oaks that lined the bayou near the New Orleans Museum of Art entrance are gone—all taken down by Katrina, though they looked as though they could never be uprooted. Familiar palmetto trees have disappeared, as have many of the city's magnolias.

The birches and firs and spruce trees of the north are stunning in their angular beauty, and I am always in awe of them. Here, the sculptural effect of our trees is soft and dreamy, like Louisiana itself. Pollution has dramatically decreased the volume of Spanish moss that drapes our oaks, but there is enough of it left to delight us. Louisiana trees reach out and drape and blur the landscape's

sharp edges. Even the pines, which do not sprawl or branch dramatically—when gathered together—cover the day with a dark green blanket that shades the skin and calms the mind.

Mother Nature has been unkind to Louisiana's trees, but bulldozers and chainsaws are to be feared even more than hurricanes. One would think—after seeing our trees and wildlife devastated by Katrina—that an effort would be made to save every tree possible. Instead—banks and cell phone stores now stand where once, owls and squirrels nested in pines. Deer are struck by oncoming cars, and starving foxes wander the neighborhoods, victims of developers' frenzy.

Fortunately, there are still enough trees standing to form near-canopies that line my path in and out of our neighborhood. There are still cones falling onto the ground not far from our house, and there are still adequate homes for the many species of birds that live with us. And if the trees are still standing when I finally leave Louisiana, I will miss their delicate shapes and welcoming forms “uttering joyous of dark green” more than anything else.

THE END

See bio below:

Diane Elayne Dees is a writer, psychotherapist and organic gardener. Her poetry has been widely published, and a series of her nature poems was read on "The Naturalist's Datebook," a segment of Martha Stewart Living Radio. Diane lives in Covington, Louisiana, where she has seen over two dozen species of birds in her yard.