

It Might Be Fine

We glide through the swamp, our paddles an afterthought. The channel is narrowing and the cypress knees closing in. It's hard to navigate in a tandem kayak, but we do our best, limbs and hats askew, speaking hushed, watching for wildlife.

The birds soon become louder than our whispers and we watch as an egret dances and bobs—attacking its prey finally with a swoop of neck. Exceptional plumage, the guide book says. I nod. The gators too are graceful—heads sinking below the water without breaking surface tension or eye contact. It's a predatory intimacy.

Our guide is not a bayou native—she is from Belgium, but moved to New Orleans for love and is now in visa limbo, her condo in Belgium standing empty. I try to imagine what it would be like to just up and leave your life for another. I can't.

We are learning about Spanish moss now and its relationship with the trees. It is not actually moss, the guide says. It's also not Spanish. It doesn't hurt the trees by growing on them—the two protect each other and live together peacefully into old age.

Who gives a thing a name, and when?

In the back of the kayak sits a girl I dated briefly, years ago. We made a kite together once—we picnicked and rode bikes and had sex with the window open. I remember how good it felt when she pulled me to her by my hips, fingers in my waistband. But I was leaving then and now. We are nameless, a worn out what-if.

I am thinking too hard and paddling too fast. "Slow down," she says. And then, "stop." She points at two young gators on the shore, sunning themselves. We drift closer and stare back at them until we spot a Louisiana Heron, brittle legs and slender neck, spreading its wings. Herons are solitary eaters but social nesters. When it takes off, its gray and purple wings stretch out to reveal a cream underside, its bill and legs flash yellow and it

is suddenly impossibly long and lost in the tops of the cypress trees. But its shadow swims beside us for a minute longer.

What if I let myself stay?

The Louisiana Heron was recently renamed the “Tricolored Heron” our guide says. There was an outcry among the birders of Louisiana, for whom the bird meant “ours.” But to name a thing is always to leave it, to limit its language: a false horizon, an empty condo, a belonging.

The condo might echo, it might be full of black flies.

It might be fine.