

8-26-2021

#Creekshed - Florida Summers Make Me Nervous and Not Just for the Normal Reasons

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Hagood, Amanda, "#Creekshed - Florida Summers Make Me Nervous and Not Just for the Normal Reasons" (2021). *#Creekshed: Creekshed Narratives*. 9.
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Florida summers make me nervous, and not just for the normal reasons

City Wilds.

By [Amanda Hagood](#)



cityofstpete/Flickr

Anyone else worry about Clam Bayou, one of the largest remnants of tidal estuary in Pinellas County, and how it will be swamped and fall off the map?

Summer in Florida makes me nervous, and not just for the normal reasons.

Sure, there are hurricanes pinballing across the Gulf, algal blooms choking our shoreline with dead fish, and a heat-humidity combo that makes you feel, as a friend says, “like walking through somebody else’s mouth.” In a way, these are things I have come to expect from Florida, a state where

nature has a flair for dramatically reasserting itself despite our best attempts to terraform it into oblivion. These are things that—taken separately, and until they start happening to you—can be

weathered OK with open-toed shoes and comfortable clothing, rum drinks, and a reasonable tolerance for the Cone of Uncertainty (which pretty well describes my normal existential state anyway).

The problem, of course, is that they *aren't* happening separately. And they happening to us.

Climate change, with its welter of disastrous effects, is unfolding faster and with greater intensity than we ever really believed it would. Rising sea levels are impacting coastal communities from Fort Lauderdale, which has installed an elaborate system of tidal valves to combat flooding, to Yankeetown, where saltwater intrusion has begun to create a rim of dead and dying trees where coastal forests used to be. Record-setting temperatures are driving more Floridians, particularly in our cities, to the doctor's office with heat stress and respiratory illnesses worsened by climate change. Warmer waters are bleaching and killing the coral reefs that support our fisheries, and even the seashells littering all of our yards and bookshelves bear the marks of climate-driven ocean acidification. And with changing storms and seas directly undermining the tourism, agriculture, real estate construction, and ports that uphold our economy, it's no wonder that Susan Glickman, Florida Director for the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, says "Floridians are feeling the heat and paying the price for climate change."

Now, into this noxious mix comes the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), predicting that the earth will cross a dangerous threshold of a 1.5 degrees celsius rise in annual global temperature—a tipping point around which the Paris climate agreement is organized—in the 2030s (while noting that average temperatures and carbon emissions have *increased*, not decreased, since the 2015 agreement went into effect). The U.N. has called the situation a "code red for humanity," an emergency which is going to affect where we can live and what we can eat, and test our ability to protect basic human rights (which we aren't exactly great at, even now).

So yes, Florida summers make me nervous. For all the global significance of these transformations, there is something acutely local in the way I worry. I can't stop imagining what my neighborhood, perched on the edge of Boca Ciega, will look like in 50 years: how favorite haunts like Clam Bayou, one of the largest remnants of tidal estuary in Pinellas County, will be swamped and fall off the map. How my 1930s beach bungalow will plunge, perhaps around its 100th birthday, from highly desirable real estate to abandoned property (probably after I have lost a great deal of money on it). How my son's generation will struggle to find drinking water as saltwater pushes into our wells and

How my son's generation will struggle to find drinking water as saltwater pushes into our wells, and will face the constant threat of superstorms that can punch out a community in a single stroke. How he maybe won't be able to live out his whole life in the state where he was born.

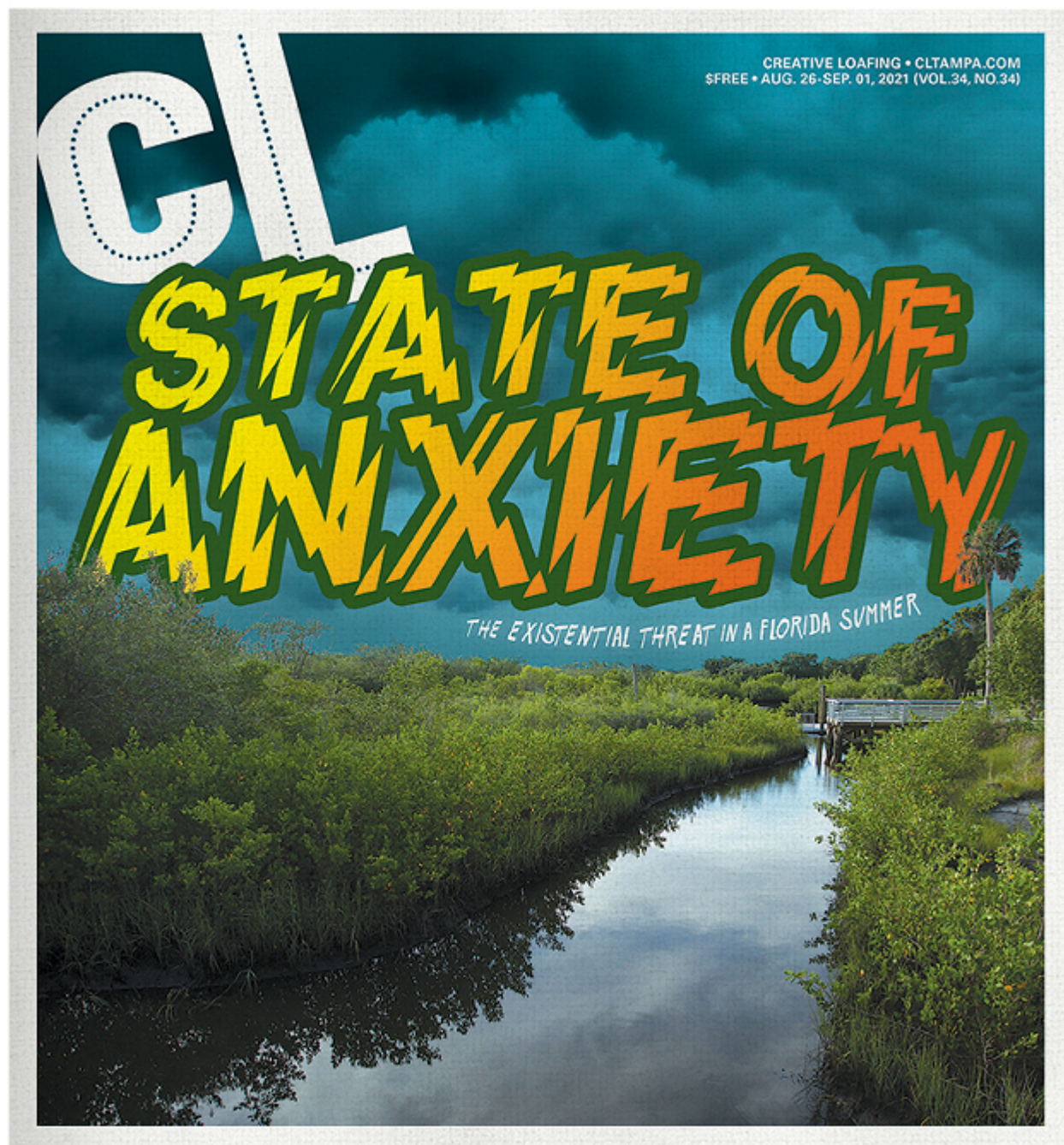


Photo via cityofstpete/Flickr. Design by Jack Spatafora.

The cover of Creative Loafing Tampa Bay's Aug. 25, 2021 issue.

How do I describe a feeling at once so broad and yet so personal? "It's like that crushing and squeezing feeling you get when you think about dying," says my colleague Joanna Huxster, who teaches environmental communication classes at Eckerd College, reflecting on what it means to

contemplate a future shaped by climate change. Or, as one of her students recently put it: “You know that feeling where your stomach drops out of your butt?” That kind of fear. It’s also wrestling with the fact that, as Florida writer Lauren Groff puts it, “We are failing the people we love the most if we allow climate change to go on.” That depth of terror, that weight of guilt, that flood of sorrow. But what if you *really* leaned into that feeling? What if you went ahead and imagined the whole state of Florida was flooded, and only a few scattered communities survived in the high-rises and hangars that remained above the surface? That is precisely what Miami-born writer Karen Russell does in her 2019 story “The Gondoliers.” The story imagines a perhaps not-too-unlikely scenario in which a gigantic seawall built around South Florida catastrophically fails, drowning much of Miami and prompting the United State to officially abandon the city and the rest of its soggy home state. Among the holdouts who remain is Blister, a teenage girl who, along with her older sisters, makes a living by ferrying people safely across town, using a mysterious power of echolocation they have developed (this is a little less realistic, I suppose) to navigate their boats over the city’s many submerged hazards and toxic swamps. Blister’s story reaches a turning point when she takes on an older passenger who, bizarrely, asks to be taken to the flooded ruins of the seawall in the middle of an oncoming storm. As they travel, she learns that he is one of its architects, now on a suicidal grief quest to die at the scene of his greatest failure—taking her along for the ride.

As the two struggle for control of the boat, a fascinating question emerges: do we, as readers, identify with the heartbroken architect, who sees the eerie post-apocalyptic waterscape around him through the lens of fear and loss, a clear testament to his hubris and the massive tragedy it caused? Or are we more like Blister, who finds it “hilariously inaccurate” that older folks think of her floating city—a niche she has literally evolved to survive in—as a “wasteland”?

Of course, we are neither the gondolier nor the architect; as always, we readers are always stuck in the middle, triangulating our own position from the trajectories of conflicting characters. But it’s hard to resist the story’s premise that confidence and despair about the fate of the world contend in the same boat, whether that boat represents our collective journey into the future or the thin shell that keeps each one of us afloat in turbulent times. In a 2019 interview with *Esquire*, Russell speculated: “I hope it doesn’t come to this, but even if Florida went totally underwater, I think that life would continue to find new ways. People would find a new way to live with water. And maybe to sit lightly on the water as these sisters do; they just couldn’t be bogged down by grief.”

Perhaps this sounds a little optimistic, given the scale of destruction climate change promises us, but I think Russell is right about the magnetic pull of the world we know. Whether we grieve the loss of a familiar world transforming, or elevate the struggle to survive in a difficult place to the level of an art, we fiercely cling to the idea of home. “I think it’s hard to imagine these newborn generations not mourning the world that we’re living in,” Russel concluded, “but why should they? That wouldn’t even be on their map of reality.” If we could reframe future-Florida as a place as rich with the

even be on their map of reality. If we could reframe future Florida as a place as rich with the possibility of life as our own paradise, rather than a hopelessly diminished version of the place we know, maybe we could find the will and the way to act on its behalf.

Reading fiction is not going to save our state from climate change, especially if we're all doing it inside with the AC cranked up to sub-Arctic. But it may be one way to help us practice what [Bina Benkataraman](#), author of "[The Optimist's Telescope](#)," calls "imaginative empathy" with people who are experiencing and will experience the impacts of our actions (and our inaction). "Most of us," she writes, "won't act on the forecasts we receive without fully inhabiting the experience in our minds." Stories like Russell's can help us imagine and accept the full humanity of future people, who in too many conversations about climate change receive only empty rhetorical gestures. (How many times have you been urged to do something "for the children"? How many times did you actually do it?) Envisioning climate change through stories can also help us to shift our personal relationship to the future in significant ways. Huxster, a prodigious reader of climate fiction, agrees: "First of all, climate fiction affirms that there is a future," she says with a wry smile. "And it can give you ideas about the kinds of adaptations we could be capable of doing to deal with destruction."

Let me be clear: I am not letting myself (or you) off the hook. I am not saying that we can stop sweating our carbon emissions (we can't), that the future might not be all that bad (it very well could be), or that it is not a moral failing if we don't do something to improve this situation (it definitely is). But I am saying that it's important, as Huxster advises, to "hold space" for the feelings of fear, doubt, guilt, and rage that may arise when we look into a future inflected by climate change, "to understand where they come from and why." This is a first and critical step to engaging our hearts and spirits, as well as our brains, in a struggle that will require all of these things.

So if you, like me, feel a special kind of Florida-feverish as late summer comes around, remember that anxiety is a reasonable response to an existential threat. It's part of the work that feelings do to help us survive. And if you follow it to its sources, you can often find the wisdom and grounding you need to respond.



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Florida writer Lauren Groff said, 'We are failing the people we love the most if we allow climate change to go on!'

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