



Poetry: Some Places Best Left Holy

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
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A year ago in early spring, I took my eleven-year-old son backpacking on Florida's Panhandle. The lush woods calmed us, as did wearing food, water and bedding on our backs. My sister, an experienced hiker, carried the tents and struck a nimble pace along the high bluffs of the Apalachicola River.

We hiked seven miles a day through palmetto scrub, purple phlox and flame azaleas in full bloom. We climbed past deciduous trees I didn't know grew in Florida. Over the centuries, the Apalachicola River had brought seeds from farther north. "Up here it's like North Carolina transplanted," my sister said.

Water miraculously transports life. Planet-wide, people are connected and kept alive by oceans, rivers, lakes and springs.

Above the great blue ribbon of the Apalachicola, I imagined our campsite tied to the Gulf of Mexico several miles southward.

My sister, an activist for north Florida's fragile coast, told me the Gulf's health had improved. I was happy to hear that the famous Apalachicola Bay oysters were thriving. "Maybe I will start eating oysters again," I told her.

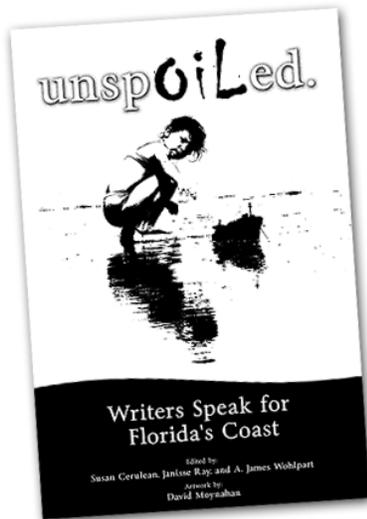
Ten days later, I was back in Delaware when the Deepwater Horizon platform exploded, killing eleven men. For three months, oil gushed into the beautiful Gulf. *Wikipedia* estimates 4,900,000 barrels.

April 20 is the sad one-year anniversary of the BP oil spill, America's worst environmental disaster and the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry. Experts disagree on the Gulf's recovery and the effects of BP's chemical dispersants. "The greatest lingering effect of the spill," says a Florida oceanographer "is that the sea floor is contaminated with an unknown and great quantity of oil."

What an unspeakable, sickening unknown. The day I called my sister she said, "We are all so terrified."

In Apalachicola Bay and elsewhere across the Gulf States, fishing families struggle. Oyster fishing is the hardest hit. In Louisiana, nearest the site of the spill, unemployed oystermen wait for compensation from British Petroleum for the biggest oyster kill in their state's history.

In the fall of 2009, six months before the spill, Susan Cerulean of Tallahassee, Florida began to edit her anthology, "Unspoiled: Writers Speak for Florida's Coast" (Red Hills Writers Project, 2010). She wanted artists and writers to get the word out that a 20-year ban on offshore oil drilling was in danger of being overturned by the Florida legislature. "Our book's publication date coincided with the Deepwater Horizon explosion, in a kind of terrible serendipity," Cerulean says. The Florida legislature did not pass the bill in 2010, she reports, but it is likely to come up again soon.



In "Unspoiled," thirty-eight writers from ages nine to seventy-two offer impassioned essays, poems and short fiction that reveal fierce love for "this Gulf of Mexico and the coast that cradles it." They testify for Florida places, like tiny Captiva Island, or St. Petersburg Beach lit up by thunderstorms. Three writers offer personal reports of the damage caused by offshore drilling in Alaska, Mississippi and North Carolina's Outer Banks.

I want to protect our Delaware coast from spoil. I agree with Lola Haskins, "there are/ places best left holy."

The View from Cedar Key

**There are acts we shouldn't risk,
the way we'd not send our children
across busy streets alone.**

**Perhaps nothing of ours would slick
the Gulf, no black goo coat
the feathers of staggering**

**birds, nothing clot the sand
our toddlers love to mound.
Perhaps we'll never wake to**

**brown beaches. But what if we did?
I think of Cedar Keys and
fine days kayaking**

**against the wind. And I remember
how it felt to land on
the farthest scrub**

**and know that the Gulf stretched
to Texas and Mexico but none
of its despoilation**

**bore our name. I ask you: what
is it worth to drive a mile
a penny cheaper?**

**I say not this. I say there are
places best left holy. I say
that if we cannot save**

**this water, there will be no other.
I say that if, when the money
is clamoring around us**

**we do not yield, then they will come.
And they will lie down
on our white sands and**

**remark to each other, shading
their eyes, how beautiful
Florida is. And we**

**will smile inside, knowing
how gladly we paid the price,
and think**

Yes, beautiful.

--Lola Haskins

Lola Haskin's tenth collection of poetry is *Still the Mountain* (2010). For information go to <http://www.lolahaskins.com> . To purchase *Unspoiled* or to read more from this anthology go to <http://www.unspoiledbook.com/> or connect on Facebook.

JoAnn Balingit, Delaware's poet laureate, writes occasional columns on poetry, especially during April to celebrate National Poetry Month. Contact her at <http://joannbalingit.org>. JoAnn will offer poetry summer camps this July at Cab Calloway Summer School of the Arts. <http://www.cabsummer.org>.