



## Nature Writing



Nature writers take part in a different kind of observation. They study the natural world as closely as scientists, but the emphasis is on their personal reactions to what they see.

Nature writers reflect on their observations in the natural world to write about what it means to be living amidst such wonder. Nature writing is about the constant relationship between humans and the environment. It is about living with nature through our respect, understanding, and awe of its beauty.

As you read Annie Dillard's essay on mangrove trees, notice how she makes them come to life by describing them as "homeless."



# Florida: Splash into Science Discovery Journal



## Nature Writing by Annie Dillard

If survival is an art, then mangroves are artists of the beautiful: not only that they exist at all—smooth-barked, glossy-leaved, thickets of lapped mystery—but that they can and do exist as floating islands, as trees upright and loose, alive and homeless on the water.

I have seen mangroves, always on tropical ocean shores, in Florida and in the Galapagos. There is the red mangrove, the yellow, the button, and the black. They are all short, messy trees, waxy-leaved, laced all over with **aerial** roots, woody arching **buttresses**, and weird leathery berry pods. All this tangles from a black muck soil, a black muck matted like a mud-sopped rag, a muck without any other plants, shaded, cold to the touch, tracked at the water's edge by herons and nosed by sharks.

It is these shoreline trees which, by a fairly common accident, can become floating islands. A hurricane flood or a riptide can **wrest** a tree from the shore, or from the mouth of a tidal river, and hurl it into the ocean. It floats. It is a mangrove island, blown.

[...] Trees floating on rivers are less amazing than trees floating on the poisonous sea. A tree cannot live in salt. Mangrove trees **exude** salt from their leaves; you can see it, even on shoreline black mangroves, as a thin white crust. Lick a leaf and your tongue curls and coils; your mouth's a heap of salt.

Nor can a tree live without soil. A hurricane-born mangrove island may bring its own soil to the sea. But other mangrove trees make their own soil—and their own islands—from scratch. These are the ones which interest me. The seeds germinate in the fruit on the tree. The germinated embryo can drop anywhere—say, onto a dab of floating muck. The heavy root end sinks; a leafy **plumule** unfurls. The tiny seedling, afloat, is on its way. Soon aerial roots shooting out in all directions trap debris. The sapling's networks twine, the interstices narrow, and water calms in the **lee**. Bacteria thrive on organic broth; **amphipods** swarm. These creatures grow and die at the trees' wet feet. The soil thickens, accumulating rainwater, leaf rot, seashells, and **guano**; the island spreads.



More seeds and more muck yield more trees on the new island. A society grows, interlocked in a tangle of dependencies. The island rocks less in the swells. Fish throng to the backwaters stilled in snarled roots. Soon, Asian mudskippers—little four-inch fish—clamber up the mangrove roots into the air and peer about from periscope eyes on stalks, like snails. Oysters clamp to submersed roots, as do starfish, dog **whelk**, and the creatures that live among tangled kelp. Shrimp seek shelter there, **limpets** a holdfast, **pelagic** birds a rest.

And the mangrove island wanders on, afloat and adrift. It walks teetering and **wanton** before the wind. Its fate and direction are random. It may bob across an ocean and catch on another mainland's shores. It may starve or dry while it is still a sapling. It may topple in a storm, or **pitchpole**. By the rarest of chances, it may **stave** into another mangrove island in a crash of clacking roots, and mesh. What it is most likely to do is drift anywhere in the alien ocean, feeding on death and growing, netting a makeshift soil as it goes, shrimp in its toes and **terns** in its hair.



## Glossary

**Aerial** Existing or growing in the air, rather than in the ground or in water

**Buttress** Something that gives support to a structure, like the broadened base of a tree trunk or a thickened vertical part of it

**Wrest** To pull, force, or move by violent wringing or twisting movements

**Exude** To ooze out

**Plumule** The primary bud of a plant embryo

**Lee** Area of protected shelter

**Amphipod** Small crustacean animals, such as the sand flea

**Guano** A fertilizer containing the excrement of seabirds or bats

**Whelk** A large marine snail

**Limpet** A marine mollusk with a shell that clings tightly to an object when disturbed

**Pelagic** Describes objects that live in the open sea, such as birds

**Wanton** Extravagant, without limitation

**Pitchpole** To turn or fall over, end over end

**Stave** To crush or break inward

**Tern** Marine bird related to the seagull