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The Marshes of Glynn (1989 Conference Materials)

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Lanier, Sidney, "The Marshes of Glynn (1989 Conference Materials)" (1989). *POD Network Conference Materials*. 156.
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THE MARSHES OF GLYNN

SIDNEY LANIER, 1842 - 1881

Glooms of the live oaks, beautiful-braided and woven
With intricate shades of the vines that myriad-cloven
Clamber the forks of the multiform bough,—
Emerald twilights,—
Virginal shy lights,

Wrought of the leaves to allure to the whisper of vows,
When lovers pace timidly down through the green col-
onnades

Of the dim sweet woods, of the dear dark woods,
Of the heavenly woods and glades,
That run to the radiant marginal sand-beach within
The wide sea-marshes of Glynn,—

Beautiful glooms, soft dusks in the noon-day fire,—
Wildwood privacies, closets of lone desire,
Chamber from chamber parted with wavering arras of
leaves,—

Cells for the passionate pleasure of prayer to the soul
that grieves,

Pure with a sense of the passing of saints through the
wood,

Cool for the dutiful weighing of ill with good;—

O braided dusks of the oak and woven shades of the vine
While the riotous noon-day sun of the June-day long did
shine

Ye held me fast in your heart and I held you fast in mine,
But now when the noon is no more, and riot is rest,
And the sun is a-wait at the ponderous gate of the West,
And the slant yellow beam down the wood-aisle doth
seem

Like a lane into heaven that leads from a dream,—
Aye, now, when my soul all day hath drunken the soul
of the oak,

And my heart is of ease from men, and the wearisome
sound of the stroke

Of the scythe of time and the trowel of trade is low,
And belief overmasters doubt, and I know that I know,
And my spirit is grown to a lordly great compass within,
That the length and the breadth and the sweep of the
marshes of Glynn

Will work me no fear like the fear they have wrought
me of yore

When length was fatigue, and when breadth was but
bitterness sore,

And when terror and shrinking and dreary unnamable
pain

Drew over me out of the merciless miles of the plain,—

Oh, now, unafraid, I am fain to face

The vast sweet visage of space.

To the edge of the wood I am drawn, I am drawn,
Where the gray beach glimmering runs, as a belt of the
dawn,

For a mete and a mark

To the forest-dark:—

So:
Affable live-oak, leaning low,—
Thus—with your favor—soft, with a reverent hand,
(Not lightly touching your person, Lord of the land!)
Bending your beauty aside, with a step I stand
On the firm-pocked sand,

Free

By a world of marsh that borders a world of sea.
Sinuous southward and sinuous northward the shim-
mering band

Of the sand-beach fastens the fringe of the marsh to
the folds of the land.

Inward and outward to northward and southward the
beach-lines linger and curl

As a silver-wrought garment that clings to and follows
the firm sweet limbs of a girl

Vanishing, swerving, evermore curving again into sight,
Softly the sand-beach wavers away to a dim-gray
looping of light.

And what is behind me to westward the wall of the
woods stands high?

The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea
and the sky!

A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high,
broad in the blade,

Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or
a shade,

Stretch leisurely off, in a pleasant plain,
To the terminal blue of the main.

Oh, what is abroad in the marsh and the terminal sea?

Somehow my soul seems suddenly free

From the weighing of fate and sad discussion of sin,
By the length and the breadth and the sweep of the
marshes of Glynn

Ye marshes, how candid and simple and nothing-with-
holding and free

Ye publish yourself to the sky and offer yourselves to the
sea!

Tolerant plains, that suffer the sea and the rains and the
sun,

Ye spread and span like the catholic man who hath
mightily won

God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain
And sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain.

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:

I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies
In the freedom that fits at the space 'twixt the marsh
and the skies;

By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God:

Oh, like to the greatness of God is the greatness within
The range of the marshes, the liberal marshes of Glynn.

And the sea lends large, as the marsh; lo, out of his
plenty the sea

Pours fast: full soon the time of the flood-tide must be;
Look how the grace of the sea doth go

About and about through the intricate channels that flow
Here and there,

Everywhere,

Till his waters has flooded the uttermost creeks and the
low-lying lanes,

And the marsh is meshed with a million veins,
That like as with rosy and silvery essences flow

In the rose-and-silver evening glow.

Farewell, my lord Sun!

The creeks overflow: a thousand rivulets run
'Twixt the roots of the sod; the blades of the marsh-
grass stir;

Passeth a hurrying sound of wings that westward whirr,
Passeth, and all is still; and the currents cease to run;

And the sea and the marsh are one.

How still the plains of the waters be!

The tide is in his ecstasy.

The tide is at his highest height:

And it is night.

And now from the Vast of the Lord will the waters of
sleep

Roll in on the souls of men,

But who will reveal to our waking ken

The forms that swim and the shapes that creep

Under the waters of sleep?

And I would I could know what swimmeth below when
the tide comes in

On the length and the breadth of the marvelous marshes
of Glynn.

