

THE NEW TROPIC

December 20, 2023

I've had the pleasure of curating a vastly talented group of Betsy's Writer's Room alumni this year. Their poetic aesthetics differed, but they were united in their love for Miami in all its glorious and problematic iterations. Fittingly, Neil de la Flor, presents a tongue-in-cheek travel guide to the out-of-towner looking for fun. His recommendations are whimsical and farcical, but they remind us that much of Miami's charm can be found in the most unlikely places—a bakery, a strip mall, a mound of earth where mammoths once roamed. Thanks to his poem, we'll know how to find them. (Caridad Moro-Gronlier)

I have a complicated relationship with Miami and with poetry. It's really not that complicated. Both are magical beasts, not that my poem is magical, but the act of just trying to write a poem is magical even if it sucks. It's also stressful. Is this another poem in progress? Maybe. The point is this: The Betsy Hotel. The Betsy makes Miami and poetry central to their ethos. That ethos is eccentric just like Miami and poetry are eccentric, even a little bit alien just like the bubble bridge that connects the two halves of the hotel. (The one in the alley behind Ocean Drive. Just look up.) Miami and poetry are that bubble, a sacred space that belongs to all of us. We just have to protect it from hurricanes. (Neil de la Flor)

A Weekender's Guide to Miami: Off the Beaten Path Edition

Arrive at M.I.A. or F.L.L. Wear Crocs or knockoffs. If you arrive at F.L.L., take the Brightline south and find your way to The Betsy. For the adventurous types, Uber from M.I.A. Apply SPF 60, Off FamilyCare Smooth and Dry, and then create a map before you leave the terminal. Memorize the map. Forget the past. Forget the future. The map is just a memory. Scream, wilder than the wildest banshee, *La Florida!* Head east until the past can do no harm. Don't run into the sea. Don't swim without floaties unless you're an expert in aquatics. Heed the lifeguards, duh. Break the rules. Breakdance. Swim until you feel the wave of unbearable rapture. Breathe in/breathe out. Don't breathe. Hold your breath and imagine it's your last. Pay your respects to the land. Remember to breathe even when the humidity in your lungs calls you *nemesis*. Let it ride. Ride a bike. Avoid Vespas. Rent a Vespa. Rent a time-travel machine. Google "best places to rent a time-travel machine in Miami" and travel back to a time before the industrial revolution, before de León and de Soto, before the Calusa and the Tequesta, before the Pleistocene. Don't believe a word I say, I say. There was once a time when mastodons, mammoths, and saber tooth cats twerked across this forlorn landscape. Believe in me. Believe in Crypto. Don't believe in magic. There are no mountains here. Use your eyes and look up. Never close your eyes. Believe me, I say. Never stop looking up (unless you're walking off a cliff). There are no cliffs, either. Take off your Crocs or knockoffs and run. Take off your clothes even if you're not a gleaming skyscraper. Feel like a hot gleaming skyscraper. Feel the hot (or if you dig deep enough, the cold) sand between your toes and make the sign of the cross or whatever it is that you need to do to anoint yourself as a wild child of this sweet paradise. Propose marriage on the beach (filtered.) Post it on social media. Fight with your loved one on the beach (unfiltered.) Repost the proposal, I propose. The past is a glorious bastard. The sky is a documentarian. You will be held accountable. Don't sign anything and never sign up for something. Avoid the boat tour: it's a death trap. Avoid stasis: it's a death trap. Avoid I-95: it's under construction. Before you head back to The Betsy, locate the beaten path, the one lined with alligators and burned-out cars. It's the alley behind Ocean Drive: it's a parallel world. It's a beautiful world. Find the spacecraft. Look up. This is the real deal. It is almost time for you to ascend. In time, you will understand Karla Croqueta, the bearded drag scene, and the empty bookshelves. You will undress us like so many have undressed you. For profit. For pleasure. For kicks. In time, you may understand why some stay for the tax breaks and insurance premiums. You may even uncover the lost world of the Warsaw Ballroom or Paragon. But before you enter that spaceship, promise me this: select two books of poetry from the shelves. If you don't like poetry, that's on you, but select anyway. Rip out the pages and spread them across the bed and the floor. Close your eyes. I said, *close your eyes*. (Stop reading for 10 seconds and then open your eyes and continue reading this poem. You're more than halfway here.) Now, do this for me: create your own book of poetry and fill that book with lies, metaphors, and equations. Fill it up like a gas guzzler. Fill it until the Crocs or knockoffs melt off your feet. Say whatever you want to say. It's your book. This is your holiday. We just want to be loved by you, man, just like you want to be loved by us. Even if it's only for a weekend.

Neil de la Flor is a writer, educator, artist and Executive Director of Reading Queer, a Knight funded organization dedicated to promoting queer literary culture in South Florida. His first book, *Almost Dorothy* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2010), won the Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize.