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Electricity

Ken Autrey

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Electricity

Just east of Pascagoula, The Gator Ranch sign
blares, “Take a Walk on the Wild Side,”
its red arrow pointing down a gravel track
off Highway 90, where a machine
with giant whirling blades has lopped off
branches of pine trees lining the shoulder,
limbs torn as though by some huge beast.
In the back seat, my granddaughter fidgets
for swamp life, and when I park
in front of the garish pink gift shop, I see
the spread is in fact more swamp than ranch.

We get tickets and stroll on the boardwalk
to inspect the snouted reptiles in a fenced,
algae-covered pond. I buy a bag
of food pellets. Wired, she tosses them
toward the mouths that surge
and snap when morsels pepper
the murky water. We board an airboat,
careen and swirl through the swamp,
slowing to see creatures crouched placid
in the gloom of palmettos. The driver
jolts them into action with marshmallows.

Later, a man hands my granddaughter
a baby gator, jaws bound
with a rubber band, tail ticking
back and forth. In the shop we find
t-shirts, stuffed animals, plastic snakes,
shot glasses, postcards, and in one corner,

an electric chair, relic from the old prison,
arm and leg straps hanging like tongues
from timeworn wood. I stop her
just as she veers over to sit in it,
hold her close, and feel her shudder
as we choose ice cream bars
from the humming freezer by the door.