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## **Appaloosas in the Vineyard**

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*"Out of the tree of life  
I just picked me a plum"  
--Frank Sinatra*

I live in the brown house, that's what my Talquin Electric Cooperative bill says. No address, no other description. I wonder, now and then, what Talquin says of my neighbors. To the east, *two-house complex with turkeys and cow shit in the yard?* To the west, *ramshackle trailer behind garlic field?* I live in the brown house and I have found a home. I have always felt at home at the beach, on a river, or in any sea coast town. But before this I have never been at home or had a home. The house I grew up in was my father's house; only the neighborhood was mine. After I moved to Florida with my mother in 1967, we lived in apartments while I was in high school, and then I lived in apartments on my own or shared houses for 14 years. The first years of marriage we lived in a rented house that was almost home, except that we rented it and too many things were broken, too many things didn't work right and there was nothing to do about it. Now I live in the brown house and I am home.

We live in the part of Florida that on most road maps is in the insert at the bottom of the page. You're looking for Gadsden County, following I-10 or US 90 west from Tallahassee and suddenly Florida ends and the map says *See Insert At Bottom*. That's West Florida, the Panhandle. We end up living, visually, in a map's flat orientation to the spiritual universe, somewhere south of the Tampa downtown enlarged section and left of the Keys. They cram 190 miles of land and people down there in a little insert. We're bigger than Rhode Island, Connecticut, or Delaware and not only can't we get on the page with the rest of Florida, we don't get enough

space so that you can read the names of towns like Two Egg, Izagora, and Bayou George. On the Rand McNally I carry in my car the insert border might just slice through our house. We might be lost in the divide, neither wholly on the main map or the insert. Our community, Sycamore, which once was a thriving village, but somehow never became incorporated, doesn't receive a mention on the map. We're just the stretch of Gadsden County 270 between Greensboro and Chattahoochee. When friends wanted to visit, I used to tell them to go past the Sycamore Cemetery and turn right at the second dirt road past the Tripple D store (it really had two Ps.) That's our road. But a winter storm right before Christmas blew the Tripple D sign down and now it's identified in my directions by whatever plastic promotional sign happens to be hung on the plywood walls--BIG BUCK CONTEST adorns the store during deer season. Now all bets are off as it's been sold to someone named Aunt Ginn. And, truly, hardly anyone ever comes to visit anyway.

The first time we drove down our then unnamed dirt road, six beautiful appaloosas were grazing in an abandoned vineyard. They dappled the green vineyard as they stood among grapes and trellises gone wild with neglect. They grazed the good grass between the rows and maybe snatched an occasional scuppernon for a treat. Purple grapes peeked out from the wild green-brown vines. In the western end of the vineyard, cattle kept the grass at bay and dropped their big dark pies down the rows. No one paid our car much attention and then as we turned down our driveway to be, which looked like an old wagon road, everything else fell away--the highway, the dirt road, the horses and cattle-- and we saw the house we wanted as a home, nestled in a green glade. It had, and still has, a Sleeping Beauty effect. Driving our dirt road, from late spring until autumn, there's no evidence of a house; even as you come down the drive the first hundred feet, nothing shows. Then the driveway curves around an out of control jungle of wisteria and there's the house sitting amid tall loblollies, behind a short screen of hickory and wax myrtle. It's like finding the perfect camping space in the forest. As I roll into the glade that is our frontyard, I say, *this is a nice place, let's stay here.*

It's a brown house as the utility company so rightly pointed out, stained a color that Lowe's calls "dark fawn" that fits the pine topography. The porches and decks allow us to spend as much time outside as we can, even while we're in the house. This is our home now. The dogs have taken the woods for their own. One more thing, a bonus, waits behind the house. Sitting on the back porch you hear water flowing so you hike down the steepheads that fall swiftly from the backyard, slosh through some spring-fed muck and there it is--the waterfall. A ten foot drop in a Fuller's earth grotto to a pool beneath, a pool deep enough to sit in summer days, though we are a little worried about the water moccasins. I killed one two weeks after moving in and now poisonous serpents seem to rear their heads when we consider water sports.

This is our home--snakes, dogs, appaloosas, grapes, cows and lizards--little lime green electric lizards, bigger guys with cerulean tails, fat skinks. They climb the screens of the back porch like acrobats, hang upside down, and surprise bugs who think that air is safe from ground-dwelling predators. Every morning we wake to a cacophony of chickens and turkeys and the occasional lowing of a cow that's grazing in the neighbor's low pasture. This home is a place I never really dreamed of, though I knew I wanted to live here the first time I saw it. It's a Florida few people know, a land that most don't think of when we think *Florida*.

In fact, this land I'm living on a few miles east of the Apalachicola River, a Florida with hills and valleys, ravines with creeks at their bottoms, rivers with bluffs, *is* the bottom of the Appalachians. A line runs through here called the Cody Scarp, which divides the upland red clay and hardwood forests from the lower sand and pine scrub coastal region. We're a few miles north of the scarp and because of that fortuitous geographical location, we live among what seems to be dislocated elements--mountain laurel, sycamore, hickory and ash. Here, the rivers running down from the Appalachians--now called the Flint, the Chattahoochee and the Apalachicola, but really all one great watershed-- deposited the seeds and remnants of the mountains.

### *Going Home*

I came here, to this land in Gadsden County with the appaloosas and red clay, via a circuitous route fitting the history of the New World traveler in La Florida. We all knew little about where we were going, were unprepared upon arrival, and had much to learn about the geography of our new lives. We were usually driven by desire or loss, dislocated by greed or sorrow, hoping to find a dream more than a home.

In Florida, and perhaps California, places that are as much myth and fantasy as reality, one can call the state a home, because the state's identity over shadows any of its parts. When I talk about Pennsylvania, the state I was born in, I only consider the Pittsburgh area as home. Philadelphia is really in New Jersey. But when I'm away from Florida, I say I come from, or am going to, *Florida*. Just Florida. If pressed I may designate which part of the state, but it's always a second thought. For nearly forty years now Florida has been my home, not Riviera Beach, West Palm Beach, Palm Beach Gardens, Gainesville, or Tallahassee--just Florida.

Florida is that big, bigger than any geographical reality. Florida is desire, the land of dreams, the place people go dreaming of a new life, looking for magic, and it has been for almost five hundred years. Throughout Florida's history people have come here from other worlds searching for something--immortality, gold, land, wealth, sun, or the good life during retirement. Most of them found something; some of them found nothing and died broken and lost. *La Florida*, for the Spaniards, was all of North America not included in Mexico; it stretched from the Keys to Canada, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi. A big place destined to get smaller.

### *La Florida*

There are few books chronicling the settling of Florida, and the Florida story didn't make it into the texts of our general schoolbook American history. For the most part, there are no names for the people who came here (no Pilgrims,

pioneers, frontiersmen, Okies) or for the roads that brought them here. Generally, they didn't use roads, since most of them came by sea and settled near the ocean or the Gulf. Those who came overland didn't migrate in great wagon trains and epic movements, but drifted in from Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, a family at a time. There was one established road in pre-British Florida--the Spanish Mission Trail--that linked a rosary of missions from St Augustine to Pensacola, but this trail hardly took on the historical significance of the Oregon or Santa Fe Trails and, for the most part, wasn't part of Florida's settlement narrative

With the exception of Ponce De Leon, the names of Florida's discoverers and colonizers are not as well known as are the household names of the settlers of New England, Virginia, and the western frontiers. In Florida, we have no Miles Standish, John Smith, Daniel Boone or Kit Carson. Ponce De Leon everyone knows, but American history has written him off as a fool and a dreamer because he believed in the Fountain of Youth rather than a City on a Hill or a Northwest Passage. The Spanish explorers, driven by their material lust, come off poorly in pragmatic American histories as searchers for mythical fountains and cities of gold. As it turns out, the quest for a fountain of youth is the most accurate symbol we have for modern Florida; the fountain of youth is our Puritan work ethic, our Congregationalism, our Transcendentalism, and Yankee ingenuity. Florida is a land born of dreams and schemes and if the fountain of youth was never here, it should have been.

The first wave of Spaniards, who tried, however halfheartedly, to settle Florida, failed. Florida was a tough place to live, a place that for all it resembled a tropical paradise was an unyielding and sometimes deadly world of heat, insects, disease, snakes, alligators and virtually unpassable swamps and forests.

If the Spanish had been as diligent about settling the land as the English, that is if their primary concern had not been to find gold and silver or convert Indian souls, maybe their Florida efforts would have yielded towns instead of myths and failed missions. As it turned out, much to the Spanish explorer's chagrin, there was no gold in Florida. The orange crop wasn't planted yet and tourists, technically

speaking, hadn't yet hit the New World. Florida's lack of gold, its inability to provide the wealth that Mexico and Peru had sent back to Spain, caused the Spaniards to lose interest in Florida and abandon their efforts to settle this fair state. Florida's future was a long way off; it was a frontier until the late 19th century and by then the Spaniards were almost forgotten.

Despite what was largely a failed mission, the oldest European settlement in the United States is in, as most of us know, Florida. St Augustine was a flourishing community years before the Mayflower anchored. But that hardly matters to United States history or mytho-history. Visitors to St. Augustine confuse it with Disney World and think that it was manufactured as a tourist site, a designated cultural object constructed by a small town chamber of commerce to look quaint. So even our real history gets lost in the event that Florida has become--a place for tourists to escape their real world up North.

The name is magic. Florida -- even if you know better when you hear it you think of palm trees and blue water. It's almost the tropics, almost a Caribbean island. In fact, if we could think of ourselves as living on a Caribbean island, instead of a state somehow strangely related to New York and New Jersey, our lives, politics, ecology would all be better off. Now days, to those who have lived in Florida for a while, it appears that everyone wants to come here, even if they are likely to be shot in their rental cars. But for the first 450 years of Florida's life no one wanted to be here; it wasn't until the rest of the country grew old and frazzled and air conditioning became ubiquitous that anyone had much interest in Florida.

### *The Journey*

In early January of 1967 I moved to Florida, so I'm now a naturalized-native. I know the secrets of Florida. I know that there are many Floridas contained within the myth of the one name. I lived ten years in South Florida and know the flat, palm tree skyline and the fantastic pastel sunsets. During five years in Gainesville--Northeast Florida-- I learned about sinkholes, springs, and oak and pine forests of the land north of Ocala.

I was living in Wyoming, as far, in many ways, as you can get from Florida, when I decided to come home. I headed for another Florida, the Panhandle; I had seen the rolling hills, red clay, and oak canopies. I wanted to live near the gulf and scoop crabs from the warm waters. I wanted to eat oysters and buy bags of shrimp from grizzled men sitting in their pick up trucks.

You can't go home again, and you have to have enough sense and grace not to try. For some, the concept of the good old days is a holy grail. They don't know how to preserve the past and bring it with them into the present and they don't live in the present either. It's true of those places where friends and neighborhoods shape our concept of home. The Allman Brothers sing "I'm going back to a place I've never been—the good old days." You can't go back and find the high school friends, the old grocery stores, the woods where you used to play. You can't go home and be the person you used to be or find those memories you want to be real. Wolfe was right. I can't go to Singer Island and find miles of empty beach, clean, without the eyesores of condominiums. I can't do what I used to do. I can't go back to Gainesville and be a young writer discovering poetry. I wouldn't want to live on 300 bucks a month in a small, student ghetto apartment, even though those were some of the happiest days of my life -- before the life I have now began. But I could come home to Florida, where I had lived but never lived, and a home I knew, but had to discover. Paradoxically, it's either Florida's talent for being taken for granted or it was my own lack of seeing, that allowed me to live in Florida so long without acknowledging it as home. I was told by a friend that to see Florida (and for him Florida was something above Ocala) as other than a flat land of scrub that never changes, you have to learn to see it. You have to pay attention in a way that the dynamic, attention grabbing landscape of the Rockies or the Sierra Nevada do not demand. To see North Florida you have to walk the pine forests with your eyes focused not on a horizon far above you, but on the path you walk and in the trees arching over your head. You have to paddle down the slow, tannin-colored rivers. I had not paid that kind of attention to Florida when I had lived here, and so

when I returned, mindful, ready to see, Florida was "new" to me and yet still home.

When I left Pittsburgh for Florida, and for the first 20 years I lived here, I thought I would soon leave, if not back to Pittsburgh, at least to somewhere up North. My thoughts were mostly of the old country—the North. I didn't come here by choice; I was brought here. Cast up on these shores by the ship of divorce that most Americans sail to their new lives, my mother, brother, and I flew from Pittsburgh to West Palm Beach and then drove a few miles north to the new boonies of Northern Palm Beach County. I like to think that my settlement narrative is the same story as most of those souls who followed the flotsam trail to South Florida.

This is my unofficial history of the settlement of northern Palm Beach County. It seemed to have begun a few short years before I arrived. There had been some stragglers and homesteaders for quite a few years, but from Jupiter south to Lantana, all the land not on water was scrub. Then Pratt-Whitney and RCA opened plants in the area and recruited skilled and semi-skilled labor, machinists like my uncle from Charleston, West Virginia, and induced them to move south and settle in the northern half of Palm Beach County, and just across the line in Martin County. Then the doctors, dentists and lawyers moved down and founded the town of Palm Beach Gardens. That's it. We came to Florida solely because my uncle, my mother's brother, lived there and would supply us the raw materials for a fresh start. That's the Fountain of Youth plot as it plays out in our real world Florida.

Somehow Pratt-Whitney and RCA managed to create a hot, sandy, flatland Appalachia around their plants. Scruffy little subdivisions and communities like Cabana Colony, north of West Palm Beach, were settled by immigrants from Alabama, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky and the Carolinas--working class and lower-middle class people transplanted from Appalachia and the Piedmont--who did fine until the country was afflicted with peace and Pratt-Whitney hit hard times. Towns sprung up full of 3BR2BathCBS houses where everyone still spoke a hillbilly dialect and longed for the muscle cars that coursed through their moonshine, ridge-



running blood. This is my history; not to be confused with any other history. My Pratt-Whitney relatives found a better life in Florida--that's the Fountain of Youth too.

My family came under less fortunate circumstances; no one recruited us with job offers and low taxes. My mother was 43 when we came to Florida, a relatively unskilled woman (as far as finding good employment) with two kids and no alimony. But she knew how to work and knew that she had to work if she was to take care of her children. So she found a decent job as a credit collector for Montgomery Ward and spent her days hounding deadbeats and working deals with people who, like her, were trying to get along but finding the going tough.

We found a little 2BR apartment in Riviera Beach, a working class beach town in Palm Beach County, and life began again. I went back to Pittsburgh for my summer vacations for the next three years and left Florida at least once a year for the next 20 years. It wasn't until New Years Day, 1993, more than two decades of Florida life later, that I decided I wanted to live here, for real, for good.

My wife and I were having a fight so we decided to go for a drive; driving is often our way of making up. It traps me in the car and forces me to have whatever conversation I've been avoiding. As we drove through Gadsden County, our future home, we saw an old house for sale and as we stopped to write down the phone number scrawled on the sign, an old man came out of the house next door and asked if we wanted to look inside the house. Impulsively--we had no money, had not been to the bank to talk loans, didn't even know how to talk loans--we said yes and were taken on a tour of an old heart pine house that was actually two Florida dogtrot houses joined at a right angle. It was huge, with ten or so little rooms and each room opened on to a porch. The floors slanted. It would have been impossible to heat and it had to be moved. It would have cost twice as much to move it as to buy it. The old man had lived next to this house for fifty years; he had bought it from his neighbors when they up and left for a reason we never got. We liked that house, but more importantly, we suddenly loved the idea of owning a house. It didn't take long to realize that we couldn't handle buying land, laying a foundation,

moving the house and fixing it up. We aren't house fixers. But we started going on weekend drives through Gadsden County looking for houses and we started paying attention to the land. We started to see this place as home. We decided to live here after we had been staying here for ten years. Now, I drive past that old house everyday, and when I do I smile and look at it like one does at a house he once lived in. It has a familiarity far beyond its history. I think its mine; I know it's one of the reasons we are here.

It's spring, the last night of the full moon; fireflies blink as rapidly as those annoying Christmas tree lights set on constant flash that threaten, along with the other unmentionable pressures of Christmas, to send us into seizures. Fireflies are everywhere along the edge of the trees blinking their staccato strung -on-wires show, giving nothing of the illusion of the romantic, pastoral, firefly night. It's urban stutter. Even the dogs seem confused as they lie staring out into the night at the electric air.

Later, after I've gone to bed but not to sleep, a firefly makes it through our poor excuse for a screen door and comes blinking through the bedroom-- bap,bap,bap-- Tinkerbell, with the rhythm of an EKG machine. Our house is an insect zoo right now; the new puppy has poked through all of the low screens. She hates to be in the house when something is happening outside, as much as she hates to be outside when she thinks things are happening in the house. The results are a house full of moths, flies, beetles and other night-winged creatures bred in the nearby garlic and soybean fields and ineluctably attracted to the light. Luckily the mosquitoes aren't here yet.

Coming home the other night, one of the first warm and humid nights of spring, my skin still damp from the sweat of playing softball, I drove with the windows down and felt the cool air on my neck. I smelled the turned dirt in the tomato fields and imagined the green stems winding up their stakes. I saw them out there, twisting, sending out a thin runner, inching skyward and thought of them

growing only in the dark when no one was watching, no one tramping down the rows. Where the road dips to cross the creek and the air is always a few clicks cooler, frogs popped the quiet air. I slowed my truck to listen and thought, suddenly, that I really love this. This is my life.

I passed the Sycamore Cemetery that tells me, in simple stone silence, that my turn is a mile down the road. Then the Triple D--tonight, late, closed--said slow down, your road is only a quarter mile away. At night I need these navigational aids because I don't see very well anymore--part of the general physical deterioration that I assume, for the comfort it brings, afflicts us all as we age. I slow down at the little store and begin to look for the reflector on the newspaper box by our dirt road. I'm thinking of putting a set of reflectors, some hieroglyphic that says *you are home*, but only to me and only at night.

I'm going very slowly now, bumping along our dirt road that the spring rains have rutted, trying to stay in the larger tracks left by a truck bigger than mine. The grape arbor is shining in the moonlight, and the neighbor's dogs and turkeys must be sleeping. By the time I reach our driveway I'm barely moving, looking hard in the headlights for the fox I saw three nights ago, but it's not around tonight, and I coast down the dark drive, hemmed in by pine and sweet gum, toward the soft lights that glow. The dogs run to greet me at the front door. The fish tank hums a welcome home tune. My wife is asleep. I have to thank something for this life. Some force or spirit--call it luck or love--brought this brown house to me and led me, finally, after years of scrambling, home. I know I'm a lucky man who has received a thousand pardons for his sins, however grievous or minor they may have been. Tonight's a good night for sitting on the back porch; moonlight sifts through loblolly and long leaf, and the needles glow as if coated in thin silver. I've got two dogs on the old couch with me and we are sending a message to Ponce De Leon--  
*Thanks for this place, this Florida. Keep the Fountain.*