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The Jungle Down the Street, the Town Across the Bridge, All is Very Well

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The Jungle Down the Street, the Town Across the Bridge, All is Very Well

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
The Department of Writing and Linguistics.

By
Taylor Bruce Tyson

Under the mentorship of Professor Emma Bolden

ABSTRACT

The Jungle Down the Street, the Town Across the Bridge, All is Very Well is a series of short, nonfiction essays attempting to paint several portraits—regional, ecological, familial, and personal. Focused around the town of Apalachicola, Florida, it addresses themes of family, folklore, tragedy, and the “New Sublime,” or the feeling of wonder at the beauty that precedes an inevitable end. The piece attempts to blend multiple narrative and thematic arcs through the use of humor, anecdote, and historical research.

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Invocation

Nowhere will be restored. No place will be made whole. Nothing will be regained. The earth is wet, and the water dousing it smells of sulfur. It swallows lives and livestock. Silently and over lifetimes.

Florida is alive, out in the water, like a great, glistening python. The foot of the lion dangles over the ocean, cut by a government of men to resemble God's butterfly net. And there, on the handle, it is slick with divine sweat, and it is soaked with the blood of the men who would tame it.

There is nothing to see in the sweat. There are no eyes to see it. There will be no words to describe it or stories to tell. Lives built on tabby and stucco and blood and calcium dissolve like sandstones under the tide. Under the bridge, in the claws of the pelicans—they are scattered against the waves and brought down until they are profoundly lost among the dwindling oysters.

You cannot un-shuck the oyster, not through adhesion, nor committee, nor the harvest.

Dramatis Personae

John Taylor: a scientist, a stepfather, a shock of white hair, an outsider, Shirley's second husband.

Shirley Taylor: a secretary, a scoffer, a moral authority, an insider, John's second wife.

Don Lanier: a pharmacist, an ex-husband, a golfer, a pilot, a gator.

Elizabeth Tyson: a daughter, a mother, an oyster hater, a debutante in eternal practice.

Steven Lanier: a son, a father, a trickster, a lady-killer in eternal practice.

Donnie Lanier: a New Yorker, an escapee, a mooner, a royal in respite.

Retsyo: a metaphor, a ruler, a sperm bank, a raw chef.

Kitty Babe: dead.

Untruths

According to promotional materials released yearly around the time of the annual Apalachicola Seafood Festival, the first person to discover the marvelous palatability of the oyster was one legendary King Retsyo.

Of course, no man is an island, no good deed goes unpunished, and no king was ever a king without first being a prince, so there is (as there must be) an appropriately ridiculous tale of how Retsyo managed to gain his royal title.

The legend formerly known as Prince Retsyo supposedly began his journey as a native Floridian long before the Seminoles or Choctaw tribes even thought to mosey on down and inhabit the panhandle, though today he is portrayed as a distinctly Neptunian fellow; he brandishes both an oyster tong and an impressive beard, as well as a pair of trousers which proudly cling to every inch of his legs, almost as if they are in danger of being swept away with the tide. Honestly, though, who's to say that the strange, fictional precursors to the First Nations *weren't* well-built, blond *Playgirl* centerfolds?

Sadly, Prince Retsyo's near-Grecian good looks and machismo were not enough to get by on, and he soon found himself unable to produce any male heirs to his lineage. Fearing embarrassment and death at the hands of an angry tribe of proto-Floridians, he banished himself to the wilderness in order to live out the remainder of his sad, impotent days alone. It is then, through a bizarre accident involving spear fishing, carnivorous bivalves, and an injured big toe, that he discovered the joys of the incredible, edible oyster.

So, having replaced his life in the lap of luxury for one in which he ate oysters day and night, Retsyo seemed set for his life of solitude. Again, however, he faced a problem; oysters, as you may know, are considered a natural aphrodisiac, and Retsyo's diet consisted solely of them.

In other words, Prince Retsyo suddenly become terribly, egregiously horny.

He became so very aroused, in fact, that he drew the attention of the gods—imagine that! An endowment such that even the deities dare not ignore it!—who responded as gods often seem apt to—with a flood. A flood designed to wreak havoc on the people who had driven such an obviously spectacular example of manhood from their midst. A flood designed to make the elders of those people put 144 beautiful maidens on a raft and set them loose at its mercy as a sacrifice to the gods they'd offended so completely.

And where might you think such an offering would conceivably end up? At Retsyo's place, of course! We could all only hope to be so lucky in our very hours of need.

In this good fortune, Prince Retsyo saw (and took) a multitude of opportunities, not the least of which was to nurse the lovely maidens back to health and set off back to his village with them all in tow, twelve (and one baker's dozen) to a canoe, whereupon he was hailed as a hero and welcomed back into the tribe.

A few months later, in the dead of a long night, every one of the 144 maidens gave birth to twin sons. Prince Retsyo became King Retsyo. Because who *wouldn't* make

a king of the guy who successfully impregnated 144 women over the course of a few days?

1204

Long before oysters were named after oil barons, but long after the invention of iron, the Venetians broke into the Bosphorus by way of the Golden Horn. They rode a holy boat right through the teeth of Constantinople, like a Christian fist. They spread God. They spread Death. They spread the God of Death. That's how the story goes. That's how the story had gone three times before, with no clear holder of the Lord's favor on either side.

When they came, they took the great chain (God's iron necklace) that had been strung across the waters of the Bosphorus. A boom, it's called. A great boom, raised on monolithic wenchers hidden away in towers on either side of the strait. It was these towers (specifically the Tower of Galata, to the North) which the Venetians took to unclasping. With the boom, the chain, the necklace of God then loosened, they struck. The rest is politics – holy, venomous, murderous politics.

It must have been posthumously embarrassing for the men who died taking the Tower of Galata, then, when a few centuries later, the Ottomans greased up a few trees and rolled their boats right the hell around the chain, the towers, and the whole affair.

Gordian

It stands beside the bottom of the great, twisting ramp leading to the bridge, which in turn leads across the bay. FRANKLIN COVNTY COVRT HOVSE, scream the faux-Roman letters held high above the door by two great, Doric-style columns. The courthouse makes a regal bellboy for the city.

May I take your hat, sir? May I get your bags, ma'am? Can I get you anything? Food? Wine? A divorce, maybe?

Everyone in Apalachicola has married and divorced everyone else in Apalachicola. Sometimes twice.

It's a knotted little town. Your mother married your father divorced that bitch down the road screwed around with the high school principal expelled your little brother's best friend who grew up, came out, and moved away, leaving earthy threads behind him to tie the whole kit and caboodle to the real world. Threads anchoring it inland a bit, where the mosquitos aren't as big and fly a bit slower.

It is the privilege of few to find themselves born at the far end of any of these threads. It is the privilege of these few to be forever linked to Apalachicola; to be able to grip those threads and feel them thicken to hemp rope betwixt their palms and their fingers and to hoist themselves effortlessly back towards the bay of their ancestors.

Even the name, *Apalachicola*—a name shared between the town and the river it sits on—denotes a sense of isolated lives and far-off whisperings. It is a Hitchiti portmanteau, roughly translating to “the people on the other side of the river,” and was

originally used to refer to the tribe who once inhabited the region. Nowadays, a more apt translation may be “them over there,” “those folk,” or “them’uns.”

I will be forever unsure whether or not the even fewer who find themselves forever rooted to the Apalachicola bay enjoy a greater privilege, or any privilege at all. They are tangled in the knot. It’s an undeniably beautiful knot – all caught up with dark hair, and shrimp boat rigging, and crackling hymnal bindings – but it is still inescapable to those who do not move fast enough.

It is either a honeypot or a pitcher plant, though folks on either side of that comparison do not discuss it around tables at the Owl Café. They retire across bridges or down the highway, but never really free themselves of the whole thing.

The words, the blood ties, the rumors, and the marriages – there is a laundry list of tiny, little threads which tie us to the places that bore us. The mothers that bore us. The fathers that bear us.

1935

Long after oysters became millionaires, and long, long, long after the acceptance of death, the oystermen floated in Apalachicola Bay, on the panhandle of Florida. They rode roughshod boats right through the teeth of Florida, like sunburnt fists. They spread broken shells. They spread sponge warehouses. They spread sponge warehouses set on foundations of broken shells. That's how the story goes. That's how the story had gone for a century or so, with no clear holder of the bay's favor on any shore.

When the great chain (the Gorrie Memorial Bridge) was strung across the bay, it was anchored by wenchies of industry hidden away in small towns on either end of its length. It was these towers (specifically the town of Apalachicola, to the West) which the oystermen took to developing. With the truss, the Gorrie Memorial Bridge, Highway 98 then tightened, they settled. The rest is politics – unholy, local, brutal politics.

It must have been terribly embarrassing for the men who broke their backs building the Gorrie Memorial Bridge, then, when half a century later, the state poured a bit of concrete and tore the old bridge right the hell down.

Introductions

The first time my father met his future parents-in-law, John Taylor (my mother's stepfather) had recently run over his foot with a lawnmower and Shirley (his future mother-in-law) served him fried mullet for dinner. One involved changing the bandages on the festering wound of a man he'd only just met, and the other involved eating mullet—a trash fish. In other words, it was a pretty standard “first dinner with your girlfriend's parents” sort of affair.

As it turns out, being served mullet isn't an insult, and it's actually damn good when done right – it's just that Apalach is the only place where that sort of thing seems to happen, because Apalach is the sort of town where people appreciate the fact that there are, indeed, plenty of fish in the sea, but that there aren't so many that we can go how ignoring how delicious a few of them can turn out to be.

As it turns out, being asked to change the bandages on a lawnmower wound isn't insulting, either. Doesn't make it any more pleasant, though.

Years went by, my father married my mother, and neither John nor Shirley changed much.

Shirley was (and still is) defined by her tight, solid curls that sit neatly on her head, like plate armor surrounding a Southern mind. Though gifted with a wise gray herself, she is in constant admiration of “that” gray: the kind that glows nearly white in the sun.

“They have the prettiest hair!” she will say of a Paula Dean or an Anderson Cooper, beckoning to the tabloid rack at the Piggly Wiggly, “I don’t understand who would ever want to dye hair like that!”

John Taylor was also defined, at least in part, by the shock of white cirrus cloud that perched on top of his head. It was never kempt, except on special occasions, when he would comb back the clouds to lay flat on his head and don one of his brown canvas jackets. John Taylor didn’t care much about keeping up appearances.

On one of his visits to Hartsfield-Jackson airport in Atlanta, he was stopped by security for setting off the metal detector with one of his big, metal belt buckles. NSA officials took him aside into one of their glass security cubicles and asked him to remove the offending belt so that they could wand him. He did.

No NSA official has been more eager to get a passenger back on their way than the ones who saw John Taylor’s pants fall down around his ankles in the middle of the Atlanta airport.

A Joke, as Told By Shirley Taylor

One day, three good friends—Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Turtle, and Mr. Buzzard—decided that living in the forest wasn't for them anymore. They decided that they needed a house to live in. A grand house.

So Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Turtle, and Mr. Buzzard, being industrious creatures of the forest, began immediate work of their house in the woods. However, construction only got so far before they needed more materials, so Mr. Rabbit, being the fastest of the three animals volunteered to go to the store to gather some more nails and wood and whatnot to put the finishing touches on their house.

Mr. Rabbit journeyed to and from the store without any incident, but when he returned to the site of the house carrying the heavy supplies, he instead found a fully furnished, Victorian manor in its place. Apparently, Mr. Buzzard and Mr. Turtle had gotten busy in his absence.

Mr. Rabbit lugged his hardware up to the imposing front door and knocked. Neither Mr. Turtle nor Mr. Buzzard answered it, however. Instead, the door swung open to reveal a butler, dressed in highest butler finery.

“Yeeees?” the butler asked, peering incredulously at Mr. Rabbit.

“Is Mr. Turtle here?” asked Mr. Rabbit.

“Mr. Tur-tell,” drawled the butler, “is out by the well.”

Mr. Rabbit tried once more. “What about Mr. Buzzard?” he asked “Is he here?”

“Mr. Buzz-ard,” the butler said, in the same tone as before, “is out in the yard.”

Mr. Rabbit had had enough of this high falooting nonsense. “Well, you tell them,” he snapped at the butler, “that Mr. Rabb-it is here with the shit.”

Advice From John Taylor to the Man About to Marry His Stepdaughter

“If she throws anything at you, just stand still. If she’s anything like her mother, she won’t hit you. When you move is when you’ll get hit.”

To Save a Bay

Apalachicola sits in Franklin County, nestled (squished, more like) in the marshes of the panhandle. On coffee tables across the nation, women's magazines call it "the Gulf's Best Kept Secret." If this is true, then Saint George Island, right across the bay, is among the worst kept. Apalachicola serves as the bookish sister to Saint George, who decks herself out in pastels every night and has every boy at her door. She is an uncouth leg jutting from the hiked, wet skirt of ol' Lady Florida – without the gall to be a truly painted thing (like Key West or South Beach), but also without the universal ability to lure in the whole family for a romp (like Orlando or the Everglades).

The roads to both secrets diverge in a little town called East Point.

East Point isn't much in the way of entertainment. Home to the Estuary Preserve, the Sportsman's Lodge, and the choice between Apalachicola and St. George Island.

When presented with the choice between Apalach (as the natives call it) and Saint George, most people choose the Island. Most people choose the beach.

John Taylor warned them.

John Taylor came down with the Department of Natural Resources in 1968. At his first committee meeting – In a small, dingy lab on Scipio Creek, just a stone's throw away from the lull of downtown – he told those folks they needed to do a density study before they developed Saint George Island for tourism, or they'd have a dirty bay as a result. No one responded, instead choosing to pretend not to hear the suggestion.

At his second committee meeting, John Taylor told those folks that they needed to do a density study before they developed the island, or they'd end up with a dirty bay and a crowded island. Again, no one said anything.

At his third committee meeting, John Taylor was dismissed from his original position, and they got a dirty bay and a crowded, very profitable island.

John still worked in the lab at Scipio Creek for years, but no one paid what he said much mind.

St. George Island still glows white and crawls with crabs, gulls, people, and the sandwiches they all share.

The Lost Art of Nasty Letters I

I'll pray for you, but I'm a Protestant, so I'm sure that doesn't count for much.

Those were the closing words Shirley wrote in her letter to the Catholic Diocese when they came calling with questions about her son Steve's dissolved marriage.

Shirley has never been one to beat around the bush – most folks in Apalach would warn you to stay out of the bushes entirely, because there's usually a moccasin or a rattler hiding out in there, but Shirley Taylor prefers to take a verbal weed-whacker to the azaleas. If there is displeasure to be had, she will voice it. Unabashedly, and on her personalized stationery under her personalized letterhead.

To Abby Lee Miller, of *Dance Moms* reality TV fame, she writes:

I'd have decked you the first time you called me a bitch! I am the only person alive that is allowed to refer to myself as a bitch.

and

You are a piece of work, and a hot mess, Abby.

She closes her letter with a command for Ms. Miller, in the way that only an outraged former legal secretary can.

Please post this letter to your bulletin board so that all the dance moms can read it.

I would like to imagine that, far away, Ms. Miller did just that. Out of fear, of course.

Abby Miller is not the only person who has found herself at the blunt end of the granny-stick. Not by a long shot. Since undergoing the post-retirement transformation of political affiliations from blue to red, Shirley has found herself locked in an ongoing battle with the hair, makeup, and wardrobe departments of Fox News.

“I don’t like that *Alice in Wonderland* hair,” she scoffs aloud as Gretchen Carlson commentates on whatever turmoil is brewing across the globe, “That’s the kind of hair you wear to bed to impress your husband.” Meanwhile, Brit Hume has “bedroom eyes,” and Neil Cavuto is an insufferable idjit.

Years ago, Shirley took enough issue with the ensembles worn by the women of Fox that she decided to take action.

When I watch television, I don’t want to see the bare skin of a woman’s breast, nor do I care to see Gretchen Carlson and Anna Kooiman’s thighs, or Harris Faulkner’s tits on television! she wrote in her initial attack letter. *Also, I am sick and tired of seeing the cutesy, sleeveless, summer dresses in the dead of winter on FOX when we in the South are dressed in long sleeves, sweaters and slacks even inside our homes. What will FOX News women be wearing when summer comes? I shudder to imagine!*

This letter did not mark the end of the Great Campaign, though. Shirley then took it upon herself to write the network regularly, with particular emphasis on daily analyses of the outfits worn by Gretchen Carlson on the morning show *Fox and Friends*. One day a top would be too low cut. On another, a dress too short. A few would be deemed “acceptable.” Victory. Eventually, Fox blocked her e-mail address. The daily analyses continue, however, because morality never dies. They are given not to any inbox. They

are dispensed with glee, given out like pearls, or the plastic capsules from a child's vending machine at, though much more durable, and a whole lot more fun.

The Chief of Eastpoint

Despite having left science behind as a career at retirement, John Taylor never, ever expressed a desire to stop learning. The television in the darkened time warp zone was nestled between two great, hulking bookcases, each filled with thick tomes that demonstrated his desire as such. Biology, physics, archaeology, theology—all of these were subjects that John Taylor read voraciously about.

“Have you heard about Ötzi the Iceman, Taylor?” he would ask. Of course, I hadn’t heard of Ötzi the Iceman. John Taylor knew about him, though.

He knew that Ötzi was about 5300 years old. He knew that Ötzi was the oldest unintentional European mummy known to science and had been discovered in the Ötztal Alps (hence the umlauty name). He knew that Ötzi had died of an arrow wound, but that no one ever knew for sure why the poor bastard got shot. John knew a lot of things about a lot of things.

Among his favorite subjects was theology, and among his favorite theological thinkers was Bishop John Spong, among the foremost embodiments of highly liberal Christianity—the operant word there being “highly.” Spong does not promote moderately liberal ideas as simple as “Maybe gays aren’t craven demons” or “Women are capable of doing things.” No. John Taylor was drawn to Bishop Spong (much to Shirley’s chagrin) for ideas like “The Virgin Birth didn’t happen,” “Theism isn’t relevant,” and “Prayer isn’t really all that effective.”

John would talk for hours with anyone about these nontraditional ideas. Shirley referred to the man who inspired them as “Bishop Spawn,” and wouldn’t hear any of it.

Foremost among John Taylor's interests was his perpetual, cultural reverence for Native American culture of all sorts. Perhaps it was because his parents were stiff upper-lipped English immigrants who hailed from a country without much of a First Nation to claim as its own, or perhaps it was because he admired the way the First Nations of North America for their sense of duty to the natural world that he had spent his entire career attempting to preserve.

Regardless of his reasons, John spent much of his golden years accruing a collection of art and accoutrements produced by and in the style of Native American groups from all over the Americas.

Some of them were useful. His red and white poncho, for instance, was incredibly thick and warm, and he was regularly seen wearing it, sometimes with very little else under it.

Some of them were a bit kitschy. It was doubtful that the various painted plates depicting wolf packs stalking through snowy forests had been painted, let alone touched, by a Native American, but John Taylor displayed them with pride regardless.

The crown jewel of his small cultural trove, though, was his portrait. At some point, John Taylor hired an artist to paint a picture of him—stern-faced, scowling—donning a traditional war bonnet akin to the ones worn by tribes in the American Midwest. Of course, in recent days, the States have been plagued by a generation of youths who wear culturally significant clothing without regard to its true gravitas, but John's face in the portrait is marked with respect and dignity for a people he'd never been able to meet in their heyday. If he'd come along too late to be born into the culture he

respected so highly, then he would make sure no one in the future who may stumble upon this particular artifact would know any better.

Get Hooked

Up the highway, about fifty dead armadillos (and at least as many possums) from East Point, is the city of Carrabelle. Carrabelle is not known, but if it was known, it would be known for being home to the World's Smallest Police Station – a small, blue phone booth, smattered with ghastly, pink lettering proclaiming it as such. Not many folk stop in Carrabelle, either, despite the sign welcoming visitors emphatically telling them that they'll "Get hooked in Carrabelle!"

Scarcity

There are always oystermen in Apalachicola bay. Usually two per tiny boat – one to tong and the other to cull. Their tongs – two gigantic, raking heads on the ends of two long poles, probe the bay for the day’s catch. Each day, they bring in what many call the best oysters in the world (this is not as quantifiable a claim as Carrabelle’s record-breaking police station, but it *is* a claim). Each day, they seem to bring in less and less.

John warned the oystermen, too. Warning after warning came from his laboratory at Scipio Creek – if the oysters were not managed, there would be none left to manage.

If I don't take them, someone else will.

Environmentalists call this kind of thinking “the tragedy of the commons.” If you’re not an environmentalist, you call it a damn shame.

Nowadays, they just ship the milky, unhealthy oysters up north, where no one knows the difference. Florida gets 90% of its oysters from the Apalachicola bay. Those same oysters make up 10% of the oysters consumed in the United States. That could be called a negligible number, until one realizes how massive it is for a bay only a few miles wide. No one in North Carolina really knows oysters aren’t supposed to be cloudy, sick, minimal things. No one in Indiana knows oysters are supposed to burst from their shells, salty and streaming violently into the devouring world.

Air Horns and Bears

The most impressive features of the house that John Taylor built in East Point are the windows. Great, tall things set into the great, tall front of the house. From there, you can see... not very much, actually. A few trees and the street. Raccoons in the night. Sometimes a bear. Shirley insists on leaving out food for the raccoons, and doesn't seem to care if the bears come along for the ride.

The county told her she can't do anything about the bears unless someone gets hurt. Instead, they sent her to a meeting where they were going to teach her how to "exist with the bears" instead.

"Look, look!" she yells at guests in her home, "The bear's outside!" Sure enough, he is. He is thin and timid, like the reeds he creeps from. Nothing like what we are all brought up to believe a good bear should be. This black bear does not inspire anyone to play dead or to stand on their tiptoes and bang loudly on pots and pans.

Rather, it inspires Shirley to go out in the yard in her nightgown and blow an air horn at it. One halfhearted blast and a few short curses from her is all it takes. The bear lopes off into the woods, fearing for what may become of it if it lingers too long around this insane woman and her maelstrom in a can.

It would probably be a better use of state money to begin a series of classes in order for the bears to learn to exist with Shirley.

On Beer and Doctor's Orders

The doctor limited John Taylor's beer intake to two a day. Shirley limited it to whenever we came to visit. John liked it when we visited. He reckoned that he was old and dead soon, anyhow, so he could drink as much as he damn well wanted. Once, before the doctor told him to stop drinking so much beer, he'd attempted to fry some shrimp in the deep fryer out in the backyard with my dad, his stepson-in-law. While inebriated. The house nearly burned down that day. John liked it when we visited.

I've Come From Hell!

A bald eagle perches on a skeletal pine, content to linger for a small slice of the old giant's afterlife – the afterlife it must spend naked, but not alone.

I am that pine. I perch upon the Florida panhandle while an eagle perches upon me. Around me, my neighbors still live, and they wish (in their tree way of wishing) that I would move. Under my boney fingers, a man wades through the swamp. He is alone with his shotgun. He came to hunt the panther that's been on his land; that's been killing his animals. His hunt will be longer than he intends. He'll be lost in this swamp for a week, snake-bit and filled with dirty swamp water. Eventually, he'll stumble upon a clearing and some people. He'll frighten them to death when he screams, "My name is Cede Tate, and I have come from Hell!"

The land on which I stand will be declared a state park. "Tate's Hell," the sign will read.

The marshy water smells like rotten eggs. It smells like sulfur. Like the devil took a piss in the water table.

The Clockwork Jungle

There is a downstairs room in the house that John Taylor built that we call “the time warp zone.” The hurricane shutters never come off the windows, and the only light at night comes from the television looming over half of the room. Time does not pass normally in a room where you can sleep until noon and still be under the impression that it is four in the morning.

The walls of the time warp zone were once plastered with John’s clock collection. Each clock was animal themed: one had carnivorous mammals, another had songbirds, another had frogs, and yet another had primates. To each hour on each clock was assigned an animal, and to each hour was also assigned whatever horrible noise that animal happened to make.

Now, you may say that not all of those animal noises could be horrible, but you would be wrong – you have never been woken up in the night to the rehearsed cacophony of a mountain lion, a chimpanzee, a bullfrog, and a cardinal all roaring, screaming, croaking, and chirping at once. Of course, no one had ever bother to set the clocks to a unified time, so it was always simultaneously eight different times.

Towards the end, when he couldn’t make it up the stairs to sleep with Shirley any more, John Taylor slept in a jungle.

Down by the River to Pray

Trinity Episcopal Church was built in New York and floated down to Apalachicola in 1839, between the Civil War and the Yellow Fever outbreak. Piece by piece it came to the South on boats, and, like an angry child snatching at the last morsel on the family plate, the South snatched it up right before it reached the sea.

Today it sits on a square right off the main Apalach drag. It is two buildings: the one in which we memorialized John Taylor and the one in which we celebrated Shirley Taylor's 80th birthday, the former being the sanctuary and the latter being the fellowship hall.

The old sanctuary looks like the inside of God's roll top desk—slats of wood are stuck up on the ceiling, side-by-side, curving gracefully at the edges of the room to become the walls. Above the nook where the choir, priest, and altar nestle, written in scrolling, antique letters is the phrase "The Lord is in His Holy Temple." Directly across from it, at the back and above the balcony, the same letters read, "Holiness Becometh Your House for Ever." The pews are weary from their years of Sundays. They are far beyond such eloquence.

They protest under the weight of the joyous tail and the repentant ass alike, threatening to dump both rear ends onto the floor. *Lay off the everything*, they say to me when I visit. Being raised Methodist, I find them uncomfortable in their unpaddedness. They hold hymnals filled with atonal, Episcopalian songs that I've never heard. Episcopalians have never heard a real melody, I think when I visit; just harmonies dressed up to appear melodious.

The Methodists in my life have always called them “Whiskeypalians,” on account of their taking the Eucharist accompanied by the wine so long-abandoned by most Protestants. Being used to the overt strictness of the parents of my Baptist friends and the relative liberalness of my own, Methodist parents, I was still unprepared for my first Sunday in the church, when, during announcements, one of the laymen of the congregation stood up and announced that someone would need to bring the beer on the day they needed hands to help do some landscaping.

Memorial for the Ice Machine

Trinity church sits on Gorrie square, so named for one John Gorrie, better – or completely un- – known as the inventor of refrigeration and air-conditioning and a founder of Trinity Episcopalian. A small monument marks his achievement. A square pedestal supports a Grecian urn in an empty field. Cars rumble in the distance, and Trinity Episcopal stands silently, still thankful to be out of that river.

One side, the one facing away from the church, reads:

**DR. JOHN
GORRIE
BORN AT
CHARLESTON,
S.C.
OCT. 3RD, 1803,
DIED
AT
APALACHICOLA,
JUNE 16TH,
1855.**

In the half century that Dr. John Gorrie existed upon this earth, he served as a doctor to the denizens of the upper echelons of Apalachicola. He served as the personal physician of Thomas Orman, local merchant/magnate and builder of the Orman house (who would have thought?), as well as worked with all sorts of folk in the area. In those days, as in these days, having money may have kept you preserved for a time longer than having no money, but having money did not protect you from dying of malaria, especially considering just how prevalent mosquitos are down on the panhandle. Though

in those days, there was no science to indicate that the mosquitos were the reason both rich folk and poor folk were dying sweaty and dripping in their beds. No, that horrible end was considered the work of “infectious vapors,” a concept only slightly more scientific than the ancient’s ideas of bodily humors and their balances reflecting in the health of the human body.

To rid the South of these devilish, bad vapors, Gorrie made use of a novel contraption, which he created by suspending a bucket of ice above a patient’s bed. In rudimentary theory, the air cooled by the ice would sink to the ground, enveloping the patient in its healing properties and relegating the hot air to the area near the ceiling.

In order to refill this rudimentary form of air-conditioning, though, Gorrie needed one thing: more ice. The only way to score ice with any consistency in the early 19th century was, of course, to float it downriver from up north on boats; just like Trinity Episcopal Church, ice came down the river in painstaking pieces.

When one continues around the monument dedicated to him, though, they gain a bit of insight into how he solved this problem.

**INVENTOR
OF THE
ICE MACHINE
AND
REFRIGERATION
AS**

**DESCRIBED
IN HIS
PAT. NO. 8080,
AUG. 22ND,
1850.**

Through the eternal magic of science, Gorrie devised a way to create ice on the spot, even on the hottest Florida day. A replica of Gorrie's device still exists today in the museum bearing his name in Apalach. To the casual observer, the device is a rectangular framework of wood and metal. There are no markings in or on it to distinguish what a technological wonder it must have been to melting patients of Gorrie's practice, filling the buckets above their beds while they tossed and turned fitfully, deciding whether or not to live.

On the next side of the pillar:

**A
PIONEER
WHO
DEVOTED
HIS
GIFT
TO
THE
BENEFIT
OF
MANKIND.**

Five years before he died, he gifted every Southerner in every dusty parlor in every home with the gift of survivability. It is him we thank when we return from the

summer daze to the hum of the ventilated indoors. It was the sort of gift monuments are built for, and the sort of gift that monuments dedicate only one word per line to.

Magnanimous. Truly magnanimous.

Which makes it terribly sad to learn that, in those final five years, he was not celebrated as a hero. Instead, he was criticized as a quack. His patent never saw production. His business partner died. The money dried up. He went into seclusion and died without recognition.

**THIS
MONUMENT
WAS
ERECTED
BY
THE
SOUTHERN
ICE
EXCHANGE,
1899.**

The Southern Ice Exchange salutes you far too late, Mr. Gorrie. The South salutes you forever. Thank God for the ice machine, because it is hotter than Hell down there on the panhandle, and the mosquitos are bigger than pigeons.

On Strike in the Apalach Bay

Edward Gresham Ball used to own half of North Florida, even though he never really owned the assets. He just shifted them around.

Paper.

Lumber.

Rail Roads.

Influence.

In the sixties (when Ball was in his seventies, and the cash came in the millions), the workers in the Port St. Joe paper mill decided that enough was enough. Or that enough was not enough. It's usually a combination of the two—not enough money,

more-than-enough labor. General anger and discontent flow towards a dam of packed greenbacks and steel.

Instead of meeting Ed Ball head on—burning something right the hell down, starting a riot, flipping a car—the workers took to the bay. Back to the oysters, and the fish, and the sun, and the tongs, and the faraway beach from where those less stubborn than them could watch the struggle they elected.

Sweat rolled down foreheads. Work was harder than in the mill, and profit was lower. Sweat rolled down arms and backs. The weather was growing steadily warmer. Sweat rolled down legs and soaked the floors of a hundred little boats drawn together in rebellion against the paper and the money printed on it, by it, for it. Rebellion against ambition and success from the shore. Rebellion against greed from the bay.

At noon, when the sun was hottest, a lone voice called out from one of the boats, gloating to his companions in the others.

“I guess we got Ed Ball on his knees about now.”

John Taylor was there to hear it happen and chuckle to himself.

Broken Bricks

The man who drove a stolen seafood truck into the building where my mother spent her childhood is still in jail. He didn't succeed in ending his life, or in getting his girlfriend back, but he did succeed in destroying memories. He wanted to die, but he hadn't had the commitment (or, perhaps, the driving precision) to pull off a competent shedding of his ol' mortal coil.

Don Lanier, my biological grandfather and the man replaced by John Taylor soon after divorcing Shirley, had owned a pharmacy that had once called that building home. Above it, he lived in a small apartment with his wife, Shirley, and his three children, Donnie, Beth, and Steven.

A few months after the crash, we visited the ruins of what was once Lanier Pharmacy. The side of the building was demolished. Downstairs had been the drug store,

and—more recently—the bank. Upstairs had been the home. Upstairs was now a gaping hole, spilling rubble and past lives out onto Main Street. Red-brown bricks were strewn about the corner. Mom wanted to take one home, but they'd fenced off the site.

The Lost Art of Nasty Letters II

Long ago, in the ancient and nigh forgotten year of our Lord 2006, when films about queer boys on the range were untouchable fare in all of the South (rather than just much of it, as the case may be today) *Brokeback Mountain* was released to the horror of down-home, Jesus-loving cinephiles across the nation. Radio host Janet Parshall called the film a force for “the homosexualizing of America.” An anonymous visitor to notorious conservative message board *Free Republic* verbosely referred to it as “a blatant homosexual porn propaganda piece.”

Similar was the response to the Apalachicola Dixie Theatre's announcement that they would be hosting a screening of the film. Of course, no one bothered to respond directly to the face of anyone working at the Dixie Theatre, oh no—they took it right to the *Apalachicola Times* in the form of an angry letter decrying the pervasive influence of

the homosexuals in what was once an upstanding Florida community. Surely, the entire town risked the wrath of the Lord descending from on high to douse the town in flame for the sin of having given birth to a depraved local institution like the Dixie Theatre, which was quite obviously making most of its money at the time peddling gay smut to the impressionable youth of Franklin County.

Shirley responded to the letter in kind, leaving no question as to her opinion on the matter: she supported the film's screening, and anyone with something to say about it could go to hell. Right to hell.

In another letter, entitled simply "Re: Gays," Shirley sent another of her heated diatribes to former Florida Congressman (and then-State Senator) Ander Crenshaw, who holds the same less-than-enthusiastic views on everything LGBT as the rest of the Republican Party.

I have been reading with chagrin the articles with regard to your viewpoint on the gay lifestyle," opens the correspondence. "I too felt the same way you now feel... that is, until the day I found my handsome, intelligent, popular son was gay.

###

Donnie was the eldest child of Shirley and Don Lanier. At two years older than my mother, he was tall, thin, and handsome, with an everlasting laugh and bright eyes, according to those who knew him, and evidenced in photographs that show him grinning, sporting a perfect part in his neat, brown hair.

“He was a good-looking guy,” my dad once said to me, “women loved him.” Unfortunately for the women, however, heteronormativity was not in Donnie’s wheelhouse.

Raised in the shadow of the monolithic South, Donnie sprung up like the head of a springtime Confederate Jasmine—tough and flamboyant, clinging to brick walls and tree trunks. Despite the swampy ground of Apalachicola, though (or more-than-likely due to it), Donnie did not stay long, and instead found his vine wrapping its way up the East Coast, to New York City, where he met his partner, Willy. Immersed in the booming gay culture of the 70’s and 80’s, Donnie became a true, transfer New Yorker—returning to his hometown ever-so-periodically as an ambassador for a tragic chicness that he was not born to, but adopted rather flawlessly.

Like himself in Apalach, though, Donnie did not stay long.

Among the most common ways that gay men who survived the AIDS plague describe their two decade-long brush with death is with an example that most cosmopolitan gay men understand—brunch: *You’d have brunch with your friends one day, and half of them would be gone the next*, one common, seemingly universal anecdote goes. Those that were lucky got the privilege of watching their friends and lovers grow bonedrawn and twigthin, mottled with smatterings of whatever run-of-the-mill common cold would prove to be too much. Donnie was not one of the ones that was lucky.

AIDS is an arms dealer, a death merchant, a cartel—it does not claim to have killed directly; it is a hairpin, a coat hanger, a skeleton key—it opens doors; it is a python; a foxglove; a plank nailed across an olive tree—it takes its fucking time.

After learning of her son Donnie's infection—the one that would take him away soon—Shirley found herself at a table on the highway with her family, mapping out what was to come. She was not, as she never truly has been, completely at a loss for words. She knew what would eventually come, and it has been all snap, and fire, and angry letters to senators since, but she had questions. The first:

“Who do you think it was that first fucked the monkey and got the AIDS?”

Guess What? Kitty Babe's Dead!

There's a phrase native to my mom's side of the family. When someone, be they friend, family, or stranger, approaches you with the question of “Guess what?” you customarily respond with one sentence:

“Kitty Babe's dead.”

There is a subtle difference between Shirley Taylor and the kind of person colloquially referred to as a “Cat Lady”: that difference being that the Cat Lady of your childhood neighborhood (and the one that every teenager, male or female, fears that they will one day become) was far more eager to share her felines with the world than is Shirley Taylor.

In your neighborhood, Cat Lady began taking in homeless kittens, because what kind of heartless person wouldn't? It started small—a kitten from a shelter here, one found in the bushes of the local market there. Eventually, though, the unfortunate truth began to make itself known: kittens grow up to become cats.

However, unlike most of her peers, Cat Lady did not once think to slow down, not even to spay or neuter her little bastards (much to the hypothetical chagrin of Bob Barker). It was then, in her excitement, that the Cat Lady of your childhood neighborhood realized her true calling: as the most liberal feline breeder in the county. Tabby, tuxedo, peg-legged, one-eyed—every cat far and wide was tacitly invited to the orgy on Cat Lady's front porch and the delivery room under it.

Shirley comes from the opposite school of thought: she is a jealous goddess. Rather than breeding and releasing a horde of feral felines on the surrounding population, she draws them in—first into her yard, and then into her house, rarely to be seen again. At any given time, there are at least a third of a dozen cats yowling, stalking, or lounging around the Taylor house.

There was Baby Cat, the toothless, tailless dwarf with a raspy half-mew and front claws that can't be retracted. She has never left the laundry room. During the last hurricane, Baby didn't get evacuated, instead opting to wedge herself inextricably behind the washing machine and howl until the whole thing blew over.

There was Star Cat, short for "Star Mother Cat," who gave birth in the garage and moved into the house after her kittens were eaten by a never-seen predator. She lived out her life never having found her lost children.

There is Tommy Cat, the yellow behemoth who lives in a plastic post office box and who will kill your ass dead if you screw around with his bottlebrush tale. Tommy is an absolute bastard, but he loves Shirley, and climbs into her lap every evening, tail lolling back and forth like a snake.

There is Honey, whose case of the Feline AIDS had the vets tell Shirley to put him down. Honey is sweet and yellow, earning his name, and he has lived a healthy life four years and counting after the vets gave Shirley their prognosis.

There was Spooky, who lived years ago, when Shirley's last name was still Lanier. When the Laniers moved to a new home by the shore with big glass doors, Spooky came with them. When they set him down on the floor for the first time, Spooky made a break to get out of that new house—straight into the big glass doors.

There was Pootie Cat, whose only distinguishing quality is the fact that Shirley kept his skull in a box for years after he died.

But the most famous of the felines ever to come under the care of Shirley Taylor over the years was one by the name of Kitty Babe. Again, though, like Pootie Cat, Kitty Babe is not known for anything he did in life, but rather her posthumous legacy.

Kitty Babe was big, black and white. He did what most cats do: namely, she ate, slept, and shit in the house. With love, of course.

And that, y'all, is as much as my uninitiated heart knows to feel for Kitty Babe. Kitty Babe was big, black, and white. I do not know if she was a boy or if he was a girl. I do not know if Fancy Feast was her food of choice, or if he ate Purina. I know that Kitty

Babe will live longer than Pootie Cat, or Spooky, or that bastard, Tommy Cat, at least in the linguistic folds of my family tree.

Because guess what?

Ingrates

“Ain’t gonna be no damn will!”

Shirley never said those words, but Uncle Steve convinced my mother that she did. Granted, it wasn’t terribly hard to believe that she had. Tensions were high following the memorial service for John Taylor. Old friends and good-for-nothing kids alike converged on the tall-windowed house in East Point to offer food (in the case of the former) and rut through possessions (in the case of the latter).

Shortly before we were to leave, Steve took my mother and father into the back room and informed them that things had gotten heated. A daughter-in-law who hadn’t seen John in years demanded that the will be read, and Shirley responded as such. Mom left the room pale, and Uncle Steve turn to my father and cackled with delight.

Orchids are Our Favorite Flower

When John Taylor began to grow old, his orchid house went untended.

When I sat in the darkened room where he slept in his last days, I was deafened by old westerns while he snored. I wondered about the orchids. I wondered if any of them were still alive in the tropical heat of that rotting shed in the backyard.

I imagined some untamed, Lovecraftian plant, kept alive by Floridian air and locked behind rusted hinges. It strangled all the other flowers in the shack. Its tendrils dangled in the humid air, twitching like dying spider legs, while its great purple blossoms bounced around like the heads of a breathless hydra. Disgusting. Unkempt. Drawing life from the man inside the house, who lay dying to a soundtrack of spaghetti western scores.

My prom date junior year of high school asked for an orchid corsage, and my mother rolled her eyes. Where she was going to get the damn orchids, she had no idea,

but she managed. It was elastic, decorated with a red ribbon and a cluster of simple, white orchids.

My date was a complicated girl. “Complicated” meaning impenetrable. “Impenetrable” meaning contrary. “Contrary” meaning terrifying. “Terrifying” meaning simultaneously fascinating, devious, hilarious, and terribly mean-spirited. I still worry about her.

I still feel a twinge of guilt when the orchid corsage fell apart before we even reached the prom. Little white orchids, bruised and browning, ground into the carpet of my car. Meanwhile, my date made me a boutonniere backed with dark pheasant feathers. It didn’t fall apart, and I felt guiltier.

My mom never let me have an orchid plant, because I killed my cactus. And my fish. And my lizard. Those took discipline that I did not—do not—have. I am not my grandfather.

They tore down the orchid house. There were snakes inside. There was no gigantic plant. There was only death and his servants who remain alive to serve him. Cottonmouths and rattlers and moccasins, all coiled tight around his fingers, ready to give you your due.

I was taught to fear that crumbling orchid house. I was not to wonder at anything that may still live inside. My grandfather died, and I never learned to fear orchids lying dead on the car floor.

Untruths II

For the longest time, I was under the erroneous belief that my mother, at the time Elizabeth Lanier, had one year been crowned Miss Florida Seafood, and had had the great privilege of riding on the float with the venerable Mr. Retsyo, King of Studs. Despite her protests to the contrary, my father took great pleasure in creating and perpetuating such stories. I sincerely doubt that – had he known of Retsyo’s reputation at the time – he would ever have placed her anywhere near the man, even in the world of fantasy.

Consequentially, I was also under the even more erroneous belief that my parents had met when my mother leapt naked at my father from a bush on a street corner in Tallahassee.

My childhood was marked with these entertaining falsehoods – the sort that I knew must not be true, but which I entertained willingly. Again, in adolescence, I came (suddenly and without any input from dad) upon the false memory that mom had been a dancer on *Soul Train*.

What happened in my mind was baffling, but simple: a few weeks earlier, my parents had called my sister and me into the living room to watch a marathon of *Soul Train*, a show I was unfamiliar with, but immediately caught up in. Here I was, an impressionable, flamboyant teenager, reliving an era I had never lived in the first place. A time made completely of polyester and narrated by the dulcet tones of Donald Cortez Cornelius, suitmaster extraordinaire. He was a man of my parent’s time, not of mine, but I still felt as if he spoke to me when he introduced the O’Jays or Kool & the Gang. I was

a voyeur to a dead man's voice, a voyeur to my parent's past – and weren't they already voyeurs when they watched every week's installment when it was still new?

These people on the screen, in the little cube, they were not "us." They were young and hip. The Bee Gees were "us," but they were not "them;" they came and went after the songs and the music, but the crowd—decked in big collars and pastel jumpsuits—they were permanent.

That didn't stick with me, though. Not that permanence. Not my unease. I was caught up in those *lapels*, hallelujah. I was caught up in that dance line and that disco fever 40 years too late.

Weeks later, we would be again gathered around the television, watching this time a program about a drug-addled grandmother. Whatever awful narcotics she'd laced her body with for years had taken their toll on her body, and then her family, and then her mind, buffing away little by little until she sat, smooth as a still bay in front of her computer day in and day out. The dastardly Nigerian prince of internet notoriety had pinpointed her as an easy mark, and what money she didn't spend on her habit went to whoever really sat on the other end of the line, claiming need of only a bit more money before she would finally get the payment they would be sending to her account. Her only solace came in the form of her near daily ritual of re-watching a VHS copy of the episode of *Soul Train* in which she had appeared years ago, as a dancer. The highlight of her life was caught on tape, and now grew fuzzy and worn out.

For some reason, this woman stuck with me. She sat just behind the screen which flickered behind my eyes, and for some reason, which to this day confounds me, I fused

the image of her—barren, worn, strung out—with that of my own mother, who had only recently called me out of my room to watch *Soul Train*.

It was thus that I began to tell anyone who would listen that my mother had danced on *Soul Train*. To this day, I remain profoundly baffled by the fact that I was never called on bullshit of this magnitude, even if I didn't realize it was bullshit. It wasn't until about a year after my initial psychic concoction of a televised, disco-dancing matron that I bothered fact-checking the story with my parents, who responded in utter confusion. Of course my mom hadn't danced on *Soul Train*. What the hell made me think that? *My profound pre-birth identity crisis*, I should have answered, but did not. It is with a heavy heart, then, that I now acknowledge that there are people in this world who I led to believe the falsehood that my mother danced on some long-lost episode of *Soul Train*, when she did not. She never danced on *Soul Train*. I am sorry.

The Jungle Down the Street, the Town Across the Bridge, All is Very Well

It is ten o'clock in the morning in Franklin County. Shirley and her neighbor have come together to watch this week's episode of *Dance Moms*. Shirley rolls her eyes.

Down the street, a path made of ground up rubber all melted together leads tourists through a wooded path to the Estuary Preserve. Local plants are marked with strategic plaques. Other plaques tell ecological stories to passers-by who do not read them.

Across the bridge, in the historic Orman House in downtown Apalachicola, a cheerful park ranger shows another, different set of tourists the hinged flaps that swing down to block a keyhole that unlocks the sliding, wooden door between the dining room and the parlor of the old mansion.

"After dinner," he says, "the men would stay for a drink in the dining room while the women moved to the parlor for conversation. This guard over the keyhole kept anyone in either party from peeking in at the other."

At Shirley's house, there are no more clocks on the wall of the time warp zone, where John used to sleep and watch John Wayne movies at full volume. It is painted a light pink and sports a cute, painted desk. The hurricane shutters are gone from the windows, and Shirley's granddaughter, Kelsey, stays there when she visits on time off of college.

Down the street, palmettos explode like green napalm bombs from the understory. Some lie brown on the pathway. Little boys and girls pick them up and fan each other like Ptolemaic royalty. Mothers tell them to put those palmettos down right now, dammit, or a palmetto bug is gonna fly out and land on them, and how are they gonna like that?

Across the bridge, locals gather in the Piggly Wiggly. They buy bread and crackers, but if they're smart, they go to the fish market for their shrimp and oysters, if they're not too expensive this season. Tourists gather in the new chocolatier shop that sits in one of the shops on Main Street. They change hands all the time. Maybe this one will stick.

At Shirley's house, what was once the back yard is occupied by the new house expansion that her son Steve built so that he could move in and live comfortably while assisting his mother in fixing the damn TV or setting up the damn FaceBook account. His living room sits in the space where the orchid house used to. His shower has three adjustable heads, and his naval uniform is folded on a shelf.

Down the street, a documentary about a local nature painter runs on a continuous loop in a darkened room. In the painter's work, little terns line up on a diagram of a barrier island like vested soldiers on an aircraft carrier. An alligator drifts by a few feet away (no one ever paints alligators killing things, which seems disingenuous). The whole spectrum of the local ecology is depicted in the painting in the movie, but in reality, it may take years for the amateur naturalist to find in nature every species that has here been depicted by one skilled hand.

Across the bridge, the hotel where we stayed when John Taylor died sits on the river. Right down the road, past a local marina, is the Department of Natural Resources laboratory where he used to work every day. It is unchanged and humble, unlike the vibrant, painted hotel with the freshly-paved parking lot.

At Shirley's house, a male peacock stands outside her glass back door and peers into the house for minutes on end. It has made its way there from the local fishing camp, much to the displeasure of the camp's owners, who would prefer it if their peacocks would stop making these traversals. Shirley cannot close the inner, wooden door, lest the peacock see its shadow in the glass and make a racket by pecking it. Surprisingly, the cats do not respond to it much. Not even Tommy, who is a bastard, if you will remember.

Down the street, creatures die and live in the shadow of modern architecture.

Across the bridge, city hall is a repurposed sponge warehouse.

At Shirley's house, an air horn can be heard, and a bear runs for cover.

Down the street, Nature makes her last stand, by law, by plaque, by merest living.

Across the bridge, another new resident thinks that vacant shop would make a nice souvenir store.

At Shirley's house, there is a bag of oysters in the fridge, and John Taylor's portrait waits to be rehung.

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