

Michael Martone

Fore

1.

My house at 29 Country Club Hills overlooks the old Country Club of Tuscaloosa. The ninth tee and green, a short par 3 of 183 yards is screened by a ragged hedge of pines and kudzu-vined sycamores. Sitting in my metal motel chair in my driveway, I can hear the golfers yelling "fore" as the sliced ball crashes into the scrub across the street. Later I see the foursome hacking through the underbrush with their clubs looking for the lost balls. Mowing my front yard, I'll find one or two dinged up balls buried in the long grass. I keep these discoveries in a big yellow bowl on the dining room table to give to my father when he visits to play golf each winter.

2.

The couple of streets of ranch homes on the hills above the golf course once must have been *the* address in Tuscaloosa. Built after the war, the neighborhood is the waking reality of a fantasy conceived in the fox-holes. To be able to putter over to the club by means of your own electric cart, that was the dream. Every house has a view of the fairways rolling toward the dark river in the distance. But the money of those heady days, now, has gone, jumped north over the river to paper company land growing houses instead of trees. There, there are new country clubs with their necklaces of garden homes and McMansions hugging the shores of artificial lakes. My neighborhood is worse for wear, shabby even. Its lawns, like my own lawn, are ragged with a mixed prairie of centipede and crab grasses, creepers, ivies, and vines, the whole Southern swampy ecology that stands in contrast to the groomed swath of grass across the crumbling road.

3.

My neighbors ask me what I read. They have seen me sitting in my motel chair, reading. They invite me to sit with them on their enclosed porches looking out over the golf course. We drink eight ounces of Coca Cola served in sweating glass bottles. They all tell me that Walker Percy wrote here overlooking the country club. *Love in the Ruins* was written while visiting friends who lived in the house in the cul-de-sac at the end of the road. The golf course in that book is our golf course, they tell me.

4.

Sitting in my driveway in my motel chair, I can watch the freight engine move a short string of cars through the golf course. The treble of the diesel notches up a thump or two as it leans into the hummock by the tennis courts. The spur leads from the main line downtown through the country club over to the tire plant and the refinery on the far side of the course and was built through the fairways during the war. The country club with its rail line hazard is hard by the lock and dam on the Black Warrior River which casts a huge concrete backdrop to the green expanse. Tugs with tows of coal and covered barges of cement slide behind tiny clutches of golfers skylined and foreshortened on exposed decks of the back nine tees by the river. They take practice swings as the ships blow their horns entering the locks. Off in the distance on the other side of the river, the municipal airport launches, each morning, the flights of executive jets. The paper company and Mercedes planes take off over the golf course. It is a strange pastoral. Green rolling hills. Pools of white sand. Ponds of black water. The light glints on the steel rails. The bridges of the ships slip by, visible above the green-level levees. The white jets circle, sink through the branches of the weeping trees overhead, making their evening approaches into the setting sun.

5.

In the evening, the automatic sprinklers sprout sprays of water on the tees and greens. The hiss of the irrigation mixes with the saw of the cicada and the chorus of peepers in the copses. The air is warm and close. Lightning bugs rise up out of the grass.

6.

One weekend soon after moving into my house, I sit in my driveway on my motel chair reading *Love in the Ruins* when a convoy of identical electric carts, bumper to bumper, jostles by. The old men are two to a cart. Each waves at me. They wear the funny hats and gloves with straps and cut-outs. It is the start of a scramble tournament. The participants disperse to all the tees to start play simultaneously instead of launching one after another at the first hole. The motors sizzle and hum as they head up the hill and drift around the corner. Here they use the public street, but down by the ninth tee, they can slide onto the network of asphalt paths built for the carts. As the string of carts trundles past, I can see through the trees out to other convoys creeping slowly onto the back nine in the distance. It takes minutes to witness this slow parade. The clubs clank on the rough roadway. I can tell the old men are anxious, ready for the contest to come. They laugh and slap the backs of their partners, doff their hats. Then they are gone, rounding the curve by the ophthalmologist's house. After a while, an air horn sounds down by the clubhouse signaling the start of simultaneous play. The neighbors say they once used a shotgun, its report echoing off the cement of the lock and dam, but now they use the airhorn.

7.

My house at 29 Country Club Hills is built on fill. My lawn runs down hill to fall off into a ravine which runs with water when it rains and where English ivy and Virginia creeper, poison ivy and honeysuckle boil

up to entwine the cyclone fence enclosing my backyard. Where my house sits must have once been air over a wider gulch. My street crosses the ravine over a culvert that drains the water out into the golf course. On the other side of the ravine, tucked behind a little redoubt, is the clutch of buildings owned by the country club. From where I sit in my metal motel chair, I can just see the end of the corrugated metal covering the pole barn where they store the golf carts. Once, on the shady road above the culvert, a snapping turtle the size of a manhole cover lounged for an afternoon. The golf carts steered cautiously around him. At night I dream of this house washing away. When it rains, it rains tropically. The old seamed gutters of the house are clogged by pine straw. Water sheets down the driveway, the street. The red dirt turns to a red slip that glazes everything with a powdery rust.

8.

Every morning, I watch my neighbor, an old woman tending her grandson, take a walk. She carries a bucket in the hand not holding the hand of the child who toddles beside her. She looks for lost balls in the rough and in the lawns of the houses adjacent to the golf course. She finds them in the piles of pine straw left curbside for the city to pick up on Mondays with the other yard debris. On the weekend she sits on the curb across the road from the ninth tee with the bucket of scrounged balls she has washed and polished and sells them to the golfers as they play through. The golfers have had a few beers by then, and they have lost a few balls that my neighbor will find tomorrow or the day after. So even though it is frowned on by the club, they buy a couple or three back from her. I see them groggily examine the balls' branding and check for the nicks and deep smiles cut in the dimpled surface before they flip their choices in the air as if to test the aerodynamics. Then they reach into their pockets.

9.

On Mondays, the club is closed. There are signs tacked on the pine tree trunks bordering the course saying that what you are looking at is private property and that there is no trespassing. Black kids from the neighborhoods next to our strip of genteel cottages ignore the signs, and each Monday morning, in foursomes themselves, lugging tackle, bait buckets, lunch baskets, and plastic pails they use as creels, they wander out onto the course. They fish the water hazards and the runoff ditches and then work their way over to the river, catching catfish mostly. At night returning, they stop to show me that day's string of fish, and tell me the story once again about the alligators that once lived on the course and might live there still.

10.

When I first moved to Alabama, I was asked if I played golf. Little did I know then I would find a house next to the country club. No, I told them, I don't play. That's a shame, they said, since you can play here nine months out of the year. They laughed and continued. Just not in June, July, or August. In the summer the green of the grass of the fairways is leached away by the sun. Action on the course all but disappears. Young boys in big hats who carry, on their rounded backs, big awkward bags of jangling clubs, trudge over the bleached hills. Lessons and league play. They hit skimming shots that skip along the placid seared surface of the grass and steaming cart paths, ricocheting like stones on the mirage ponds generated by the heat. I have fled indoors. My motel chair is chilled by the air conditioning. I read a book in the living room, look up from time to time through the glaring picture window. The course shimmers through the trees.

11.

Very early each morning the greenskeeper's men start their work grooming the course, changing the pin positions on the greens, raking pine straw from the bunkers. There is a parade of Dr. Suess vehicles streaming out from the compound of metal buildings down the road. Converted electric carts stuffed with hand tools where golfers would stow their clubs putter about. Other carts haul wagons heaped with sugar-fine sand to replenish the hazards or fill up the divots on the tees. There are sousa-phone shaped machines used to blow the leaves and bark from the fairways. There are mowers of all types, their gangly gang of twisted blades daintily suspended by means of wires and pulleys for running at full speed on the public road to get to the part of the course where yesterday they left off cutting. Later, I'll see the half-sized tractors creeping along, trailed by a train of fidgety reels v-ed behind the hitch. My favorite contraptions are the donkey motors, big engines with handle bars and their mowing decks thrust out ahead like a cow catcher. Their drivers, steering, stand behind on tiny, almost invisible platforms like the musher on a dog sled. I love the illusion of this levitation, the careless, effortlessly floating men, slaloming between the neat rows of long-leafed pine. Men, on foot nearer by, sweep the borders of the rough and the underbrush with hand implements angled like golf clubs. They swing the weed whackers, motorized scythes, as fluidly as the golfers practicing approach shots, pitches, chips. Back and forth, back and forth. The puny engines making an insect sawing. The men work their ways back to the club house, the various pitches of their small engines sputtering out, the course groomed, before the first tee time.

12.

The realtor showing me this house asked if I was going to join the country club. "It's very reasonable," she said. She thought its proximity was a real selling point. "I don't golf," I said. That wasn't the only thing happening at the club, she continued. She mentioned the tennis courts and the pool. "There's a new chef in the dining room, and a whole mess of

folks just belong for the food." And then she wistfully recalled the dances on the terrace in the summers. And later that summer, after I moved in, I did hear the old band music drifting over from the verandas and patios. The club, she told me, was here long before the houses were built. They built the houses after the war. It was a new idea then. It was glorious. Those dances are reported in *Stars Fell on Alabama*, a book I read that first year while sitting in the driveway. Sitting in my metal chair beneath the stars, I hear the bubbles of old dance melodies down at the club. I do hear, on breezy summer weekend nights, the murmur of the dancers, the occasional guffaw, and the suggestion of chiming glass. A kind of lullaby.

13.

If the weather is right, the smell of cracked oil and vulcanized rubber creeps up the valley along the river from the factories beyond the golf course. Some days it seems to have bonded chemically with the humidity, locked into the still air, and the reek lingers, impossible to get used to, a kind of aromatic film. Other days there is just a hint, a few long strands of molecules, carbon cooking, dispersed within a breath of breeze as it freshens. Friends visiting those days stop mid-sentence, nostrils flaring. "Someone," they say, "must be tarring a roof somewhere." Our roofs are never tight enough. Osmosis. The smells saturate the house. Something has been left on the stove. The stove has been left on. Something is burning.

14.

Sirens go off over at the club. There is sheet lightning in the distance. The golf course is crowded with players who, interrupted by the warning, reluctantly make their ways back to the clubhouse to get out of the rain. Bolts of lightning have been known to travel miles looking for the conductive synapse of a golfer, clad in metal spikes and gripping a 5 iron, to

enter the ground. The rain now begins to sheet and the low ground fills immediately with the gray layers of run off. I can see the lightning walking up the river, the green carts scurrying beneath the lowering clouds and the tendrils of sparks. A train, lit up and sounding its horn, wades through the course against the stream of carts flowing back to the club. Heaven spoiled by heaven.

15.

A neighbor has told me that when Wallace built the new courthouse downtown the rubble from the old Beaux Arts one was hauled out here and dumped into the ravine behind my house. Scattered on the viney floor of the gorge, covered with vines, are the remnants of capitals carved with acanthus leaves, fluted column drums, defaced faces of Justice and Law, rusting escutcheons and cracked hinges from the old wooden doors. Melting marble steps. Drifts of fragmented letters and words. Gargoyles sunk in the mud. I can't get up the nerve to work my way down into there, though I think about it often. Perhaps my neighbor is fooling with me. Through the links of my chain link fence I peer into the jungle canopy that roils up out of the ravine. Nothing and everything.

16.

In the winter, the grounds crew stacks canvas tarps on wooden pallets next to the greens. On the nights there might be a freeze, they spread out the tarps on the greens to protect the grass. In the morning, the canvases are white with frost, the fabric stiff from the cold, frozen in undulating waves, a meringue. In the morning, as the sun warms the course, the crew folds up the tarps again, revealing the brilliant green greens in their organic organ shapes set in the still frost-white fairways. The crew goes from one hole to the next, the first foursomes playing patiently behind them.

17.

A deer came with the house. It is life-sized and painted. Over the years its cement flesh has rotted. The iron tendon of its rear leg is exposed and rusted. The velvet of his antlers has worn away leaving the branches of corroded rebar. In the spring and summer the deer is enveloped by the creepers and vines which clad him in a kind of topiary coat he sheds in fall. I see his flat, staring eye fix on me as I lounge in my metal chair in the driveway. The deer seems alive because the foliage around him is alive. He seems to move since the setting he poses in transforms day to day. Or maybe he is moving. He is being tugged on by the ivy, bullied by the tendrils, slightly shifted over time, sifting into the forest behind him. A visitor will be surprised, mistake the deer for a real deer surprised by the visitor. I watch them watch each other. Both hold perfectly still, waiting for the other's next move.

18.

Through the picture window, I can see through the trees to the ninth green where golfers in pastel outfits and oversized hats take turns putting. Behind me is another vista. The long wall of the living room is wallpapered with a mural which depicts, in three colors, an elegant antebellum mansion set on a rolling plantation sward. The edges of the house are smudged by ivy and draped with wisteria. The weeping trees are bearded with moss. There are no people in the picture, so it is hard to say if the picture represents a ruin or not. It attempts to capture, I think, in its gestural, impressionistic style the indigenous Romantic nostalgia which hereabouts is so deeply layered. You would think the wallpaper is just another example of that longing. But look closer. It's easy to miss. In the front lawn of the ancient house is the green puddle of a putting green and in its center a vertical brush stroke which, at first, you thought was meant to be a sapling or an indication of the breeze, but now upon closer inspection turns out to be a pin, its checkered flag snapping in an invisible wind.