Two Poems

AUSTIN SEGREST

Shades Mountain

Born on top in Brookwood Hospital,
I was raised on the backside of the mountain,
really just a ridge, suburban subslope
under Brookwood Road’s
irresistible straightaway, its thick trunks
waiting for the cars of high school boys
to wrap around them. A notch below
Old Leeds Road, it’s called Flat Ridge
on some older maps—which, if topographical,
will show we lived beside a gorge
in the limestone called Fuller’s Creek,
though, so far as we knew, it
and the others it joined didn’t have names.
Their terminus did: the Cahaba,
dreaming its wild country length
at the edge of my mind.

Running along terraced streets,
driveways cut diagonally up to either side
of the uphill houses. Down-slope
driveways were steep as slides,
houses sunk below street level.
At the merger of backwoods
where we spent most of our time
you could get a sense of what
it would have looked like before,
if we’d only thought to look.
After the iron ore mines
and mansions of Red Mountain,
Shades was the next ridge south,
at a second remove from downtown.
Its north slope and valley were the crown jewel of Robert Jemison’s 1920s whites-only estates.
Once interlaced with riding trails,
labyrinthine roads wound the contours of forest, crag, and creek embedded with two country clubs made to look like they grew that way.

Those kids were many of them second or third generation inner circle, inaccessible.
Though we’re good and gone, though like the juniper bushes on the raw shale embankment my parents built on, we didn’t take, to this day, an old pool’s local stone, or mottled sunlight on original tile sends me into a trance. I think if I can get it mapped I’ll have it.
But then an arm gets free, a winding climb I’m confusing with another, and the old conundrum slips my grasp again.
Forest Run

Across the dip, in the driveway of the neighbors who bordered on the bird sanctuary and had built their house themselves, I’d watched as a small boy as Dad and the father and his teenage sons changed the brakes on Dad’s toast-colored Accord. When he would say he’d consider going on a mission to Mars, we imagined him in that hatchback, listening to classical.

Their back deck, I was envious, looked over the table-rock. Below us, you could hear but couldn’t see the tunnel pouring out in its pool. One of the brothers, Robert, was the sitter who’d take us hiking, and once, singing along to “Everybody Wants to Rule the World,” had driven us down to the Cahaba to wade and float the shallows with mussel shells between our toes, a riddled cliff’s empty sockets peering down. His brother Jonathan was in the Airforce and had a motorcycle with a tall clear shield.

Someone was pointing out the parts: caliper, rotor, break-pad, words I’d never heard, or said, the incredibly heavy tire laid over on its side. Everybody squinting. The secret life of a wheel! The rotor, I was warned, was dangerously hot, not just from the sun, but from the friction.
Unable to believe it, or to resist
getting close enough to see,
my hand leapt at the sizzle.
The smug humorous response was aired
that I’d think twice next time, Dad going along,
never quite fitting in, maybe a little
embarrassed himself. They tried to walk it back
when I started crying,
but I wasn’t buying it,
and, anyway, it was too late.
My fingertip whitened
like the mythical Shepherd
trotting down his fence.
I wondered if it would change anything—
my fingerprint, for instance,
my permanent record.
If I even had one anymore.