

SOMEBODY TAKE ME HOME | TJ Beitelman

Somebody take me home through those Alabama pines
—“Alabama Pines,” Jason Isbell and The 400 Unit

I came to Alabama in 1996, under circumstances I’d rather forget. I was burdened by the notion that I was an artist, an undiscovered genius. For some reason, I thought it was reasonable to come here to be discovered. I have discovered in my time here that I’m not a genius, and I’m not as good a writer (thinker) as I thought I was.

But that doesn’t mean I haven’t discovered some genius here. Namely:

Alabama autumn; Alabama springtime; Woodrow’s BBQ (Tuscaloosa); Bunyan’s BBQ (Florence); The Blessing of the Fleet (Bayou La Batre); Legion Field (Birmingham); Jason Isbell (Green Hill); Patterson Hood (Florence); David Hood (Florence); 3614 Jackson Highway (Sheffield); The Shoals; Chez Fon Fon (Birmingham); Donut Joe’s (Pelham); Highway 25; Highway 5; Highway 72; Highway 31; Highway 43; Rivers: the Black Warrior, the Tennessee, the Alabama, the Cahaba; The Gulf of Mexico; Nick Saban; Kelly Ingram Park (Birmingham); Oak Hill Cemetery (Birmingham); Unclaimed Baggage (Scottsboro); Any full moon in any October...

And my son was born here, in Princeton Hospital, the only place in Birmingham where he could be born like Ina May Gaskin says any baby should be born. My wife pushed for six straight hours. Natural, if that can be called natural. He finally came out blue, the cord wrapped twice around his neck. For less than a second he went limp and the midwife and the nurses held their breath. Then he stirred again and he was ours. Check that: we were his.

I saw the Chieftains here. And Neutral Milk Hotel. Also Justin Townes Earle. Bob Dylan. Levon Helm. Jeff Tweedy. Jay Farrar. Lindsey Buckingham. Richard Thompson. Willie Nelson. Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings. Sheila E.

I could’ve seen Van Morrison and Tom Waits and Sturgill Simpson, but I didn’t. (I’m no genius.)

I euthanized a good dog here. She’d been with me for seventeen long, hard years. Her name was Scout. After the book.

There is a TVA trail that winds and wanders along the shoreline of the Tennessee River.

There’s a spot on that shoreline that may be my favorite place in the state. You can hear Highway 43 flowing into Florence; you can hear the current of the water finding the shore.

That river, the indigenous people said, sings. I wish I could sing. I wish I could write as well as I used to think I could. I wish I was a genius. I wish I was indigenous.

I can’t, I can’t, I’m not, and I’m not. I remain undiscovered, even to myself. That’s all fine. It turns out Alabama is a good place to hide.

But I’ve been gifted by this place, too. By its genius, its geniuses. And I’ve made a life here. Imperfect, obscure, speckled with various mostly minor glories.

This isn’t what I sat down to write fifty-six minutes ago.

This isn’t where I thought I’d end up twenty-four years ago.

Intention is overrated.

Home is where you find yourself.