



Alabama Magic

Anna M. White

There's a kind of magic specific to Alabama. Specific to limestone and water. I've known about it since I first played in our gravel driveway as a child. Many people from other states would probably not agree. When they think of Alabama, they think only of the people occupying it. They see rednecks, guns, camouflage, sister-loving brothers, and white-loving churches. We have that. They see the 88-foot-tall confederate monument on the Alabama State Capitol's lawn. We have that. They see the billboard by the broken waterwheel on I-65 reading, "Go to church or the devil will get you!" We have that, too.

But what I'm talking about is older than all of that; Alabama magic preceded the manipulative treaties that squeezed this land from the souls of Cherokees, Chickasaws, Creeks, Seminoles, and others. It was here before Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren murdered ten thousand men, women, and children, and murdered the spirits of ninety thousand more with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. It came before African blood first spilled into southern soil, rusting it a shade redder than before, and before mankind ever set greed's gore-filled eye on the rich Alabama woodlands. I believe that this magic was here before human beings existed to perceive it; that it was born when the shallow, yet ancient ocean peeled back from this land fifty thousand years ago.

W h i t e

When I was little, I lived in Limestone County, Alabama. The area is named after a creek that made its bed on exposed limestone, exposed seafloor, composed of millions upon millions of organisms, calcified into the earth's memory. This memory is never far beneath the surface in Alabama; it is regularly mined to be cut into blocks or crushed into gravel at the limestone quarries. But even shattered into innumerable pieces, it remembers. My childhood home sat on a five-and-a-half-acre lot in that county. Our driveway was gravel, and every few years we had to buy more, as it slowly sank through the clay dirt, pushing its way home. After the dump truck came and spread an even layer down the length of the drive, I would pick through the rocks, finding pieces of flint, chunks of stone containing small, donut-shaped fossils, and, my favorite, pure white clusters of crystal quartz.

It confused me that the fossils were worth nothing despite their ancient origins. I did not understand that societal value is not based on beauty so much as it is rarity. I couldn't fathom how something as beautiful as the quartz was not valuable to others, how they could abandon it to a place so mundane as a gravel driveway. This inability to recognize such small beauties formed from water and limestone, or the beauty of the water and limestone themselves, is maybe why so many struggle to perceive Alabama magic.

Limestone rests dormant until it is joined with water. The gravel remembers this. Its sea life fossils, crystal quartz, and flint all exist because there was water. By nature, limestone is very porous, allowing water to absorb into it. When it freezes, the moisture expands and cracks the limestone, forming a network of arteries that bleed water from cliff faces.

In quarries, we relentlessly chip and blast away at Alabama's limestone bones, using them to lay our roads and level our houses. We grind them into powder, dusting our fields, dying our clothes, thickening our paint, and hardening our glass. We cut these bones into blocks to build our walls and into slabs to top our tables. We surround ourselves with limestone, perhaps subconsciously recognizing its role in the magic we long to experience, but we always forget its lifeblood. Gravel is often favored because it drains away water. When we powder the stone, all that is left is a fine, dry dust. When we use it in construction, we polish and seal it, rendering it incapable of absorbing water. In almost every single way we use limestone, we strip it of its connection to Alabama magic and instead mummify it for our economic purposes.

When the quarries are eventually abandoned, they leave walls of exposed limestone bone, which bleed water into the space left behind. With the rising water, Alabama magic fills the wound, and the quarry becomes a scar. This place has changed from what it once was and will always remember the cutting touch of humanity, but it has also become a refuge. The water, filtered by rock, is clear and clean, shaded by the trees that sprout and grow near the edges. Fish use their strange fish magic to populate the pool. Snakes and birds swim there as well, and the woodland life comes to drink from this place of memory and healing. These quarries serve as a reminder that, above all else, Alabama magic is resilient.

Alabama magic is a wet, dripping thing; it cannot exist where there is no limestone and water nearby. With limestone serving as its highway and water its vehicle, this magic is everywhere. The limestone delivers it to the cotton fields of autumn snow, to the shoe-eating mud of the swamps, and to the unmoving murk of the lakes. It delivers the magic to the air, where it clings to humidity and blooms into popcorn clouds buttered by the late afternoon sun. If we remember to look, it is even in our tap water with the memory of the rivers it flows from. The limestone is there too; we say there's lime in our water, but we mean that the minerals from those stoney highways were not filtered out. We call the water 'hard,' as if the memory is distasteful, but I drank it from a garden hose as a child and decided that Alabama magic tastes like life. It has been here far longer than we have, and it is beyond capable and downright determined to survive us.

Header photos by Anna White
