About 14 miles north of Mobile, Alabama, I veer away from I-65 to take Route 43, a straight shot north into the swampy sand-lands of the Mobile River. For a while I'm stuck behind a logging truck, scrawny trees from the piney woods tethered loosely with rope, a tattered piece of cloth flapping at me not to get too close. The side of the road is all brown scrub and sandy ditches, gaps in the pines revealing flashes of chemical plants and Alabama Power stacks striped red and white, lights twinkling, that bad burning-plastic cancer smell and gray haze low over the highway.

Low-slung red-brick dollar stores pop up here and there, faded white-and-green wooden churches, Catholic and Baptist both. A cluster of trailers and tin sheds advertise “rooms to rent,” with the Stars and Stripes hanging listlessly from barred windows, and next to that a church in another tin shed. Across the highway you can do karaoke in a red barn or relax in Keith's Lounge—bright yellow breeze blocks in a sandy lot under a big magnolia, a palm tree painted on the outer wall, happy hour within. All your most pressing needs met here.

Approaching the town of Mount Vernon there's a faded welcome sign, a crumbling rusted Chevron gas station. On the corner of the turn off to the asylum, the blonde-brick Mobile County Health Department stands deserted, a rusting sign and no cars in the lot. The asylum is just up the road, immediately visible on the left as the road rises and drops away again. "Welcome to Searcy Hospital" is etched into a fading and flaking wooden sign but there is no welcome, just the buzz of insects and the crunch of oyster shell gravel underfoot.

+ “welcome sign”

Outside the main gates a faded old bus stop sits shaded by a huge magnolia. Neatly clipped vines cover the green steel structure, as though someone is taking care of it and I think about the people who sat here—workers after a long shift, sad relatives who made the long trek for love and support. I imagine patients waiting for a rare trip into town, although I think that probably never happened.

+ “bus stop”

The gate is framed by classic white stone plinths, cracked and chipped, embedded with a bronze placard that reads “Searcy Hospital.” They look more like grave markers than welcome gates.

+ “plinths” and “plaque”

Beside the entrance a No Trespassing sign warns of surveillance. I am being monitored, but no one comes.

+ “trespass”

On the other side of the fence is a tiny gatehouse, unoccupied save for a fresh can of bug spray. Bugs swirl up from the overgrown grass, and I slap them away. The gate is padlocked—I squeeze my phone through the black link fence to take photos.

No one comes.

+ “wirefence”

Inside, along "Superintendents Drive," is the big white house where they all lived, those superintendents, with Christmas decorations still draped over the door. The windows are covered from the inside with curtains, as though someone just stepped out for errands and then never came back. Not since 2012 anyway.

+ “superintendents house”

At the end of the clay and gravel drive, cracked and warped, I can see the original admissions unit, the same white building I've seen in photos from 1902, and next to that the big red-brick multistory wards that came later. The cupola perched atop the wards, just a small one, is a mini replica of the one at Bryce, the "whites only" hospital in Tuscaloosa, as though all these kinds of places were somehow made better when graced by a useless wrought-iron structure.

+ “wards3”

The bugs are eating me alive and there's no way to see more, so I pick my way through the long grass and clipped hedges to look at the chipped and empty stone fountain near the welcome sign.

+ “fountain long shot” this could be cropped

Also the “magnolia” photo might work here before the fountain

The Alabama Historical Society has planted a marker here. One side tells the story of the Mount Vernon Arsenal and Barracks, a storehouse for the lost cause of the Confederacy and a prison for Geronimo and the local Apache people. The other side outlines the site’s conversion to a prison of another kind, because aren't all asylums a prison of sorts?

As Searcy Hospital the buildings housed African Americans with mental disturbance until 1969, when the asylum was forced to take white patients too. In 2012 the state shut it all down and sent people to actual prisons, like Holman or Kilby, instead. The sign offers no mention of the thousands of Black people who lived and worked and died here.

+ “Searcy marker”

On the other side of the neglected park is a neglected wooden house, maybe it belonged to the groundskeeper and I imagine someone sitting on the porch with an ice tea after a long days work, while I sit in my car slapping at bugs. A county truck swishes past on the main road but doesn't slow down. Surely I am being watched; surely they will tell me to go away. But no one comes. All I hear are ghosts.

+”workers cottage”