

Juliana Gray Vice

Noccalula Falls

They've made a park of it,
a trail bordered by dusty marigolds
leading to the falls, a respectable stream
tumbling over good Alabama marble—
more expensive than Italian, we're told—
frothing white for an instant,
then down the Coosa to Gadsden.

Water is water. More interesting the polished plaque:

how the Indian princess, Noccalula,
rather than marry at her father's command,
threw herself over the falls,
which he named for her in grief.

Even as visitors snap at the words,
something uneasy filters in,
even as the zoo's one shabby lion
behind two circles of chain-link
looms so dark and obsolete
that the developed shot will hold only outline
and the glint of an eye,

even then is something a lie
in history and its telling,
so much romance in the Mississippian wilderness,
a tragic tableau waiting to be engraved
and sold in London penny-dreadfuls,
sold to us now, here, paid for
by grim Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill.

We have the names, rolling syllables
older than maps:
Tuscaloosa, Etowah,
Choccolocco, Talladega, Cheaha,
Noccalula,

princess of ghosts.