“Golf’s past is as mysterious as the wind, but with a pernicious twist or two”
When I first play golf the kind of life I was living comes to an end, and another begins without me knowing what is happening.

I buy a set of used Tommy Armour 845s. A year of so after attempting to play golf with them I find them inadequate, tossing the whole set into the pond beside the 7th green, an expensive deus ex machina maneuver in which I am both liberated from the ground beneath me and feel I’ve made a great mistake at the same time.

That night in bed, guilty of destroying private property in a self-created act of anger, then chastened by a conscience I didn’t know I had, I dreamed I’d tossed a bag full of previously owned Tommy Armour golf clubs into the pond until what I’m ‘dreaming’ is the kind of nightmare I’d never experienced before.

The morning after this watery conflagration I begin having different feelings about golf.

It’s true I distrusted golf at the beginning—it wasn’t something I’d done as a child—but now I’ve actually begun to believe golf might be giving me a new kind of life! Perhaps it was possible that I could develop a relationship with golf until it became something I wanted to do both more and
more and less and less, a kind of new balance between being happy with the performance of my golf clubs and wanting to throw them in the pond.

I once believed golf’s for people much younger than I am, I say to Jack the next time I see him, people closer to the age when it’s still possible to have fun. And that from age twelve I should have already been a good golfer or given a series of tests meant to be failed, which was indeed the case. It’s a whole long story, I said, way before my golf life. I was 9 or 10 years old...

Jack says he wants to hear my story, but not now, tomorrow or the next time we see one another.

I fail my first test at age 8, swimming the backstroke on the Fourth of July competition at the Country Club, unable to do two things at once—to go forward on my back—and wind up winning last place. My consolation speech consists of three words, “my socks slipped.”
And there are no ‘great guys’ anymore, Jack says, as you indicated previously.

No, there are no great guys, I say to Jack.

There might have been great guys at one time but now there are only good guys who play golf. A good guy agrees with you most of the time, I say, you think of him as good because he confirms what you already admire in yourself. He praises your good shots and acts appropriately on your bad shots by either saying nothing as if he hadn’t noticed or saying something like, “That’s a good miss” or “You can still get that up and down for par.”

A good guy’s relationship with another good guy is based on the neo-liberal socio-economic model, I say. Good guys are lawyers, orthopedic surgeons, salesmen of high-grade aluminum siding, shrewd businessmen, pastors surrounded by their squad of true believers. Good guys do charity work and gamble and drink freely, but in apparent moderation; the more charity work they do and the more piety they outwardly express, the more they gamble and drink. Some guys are born good guys and can’t help themselves, it’s just the way they are, I say to Jack.

I know good guys who’ve never lost a golf ball, Jack says. No matter how far they hit their ball into the forest or into the water they always find their balls, Jack says. These good
guys are also often good fathers, leaders of money-making corporations, good men respected in the community and so forth.

A man reported to be a billionaire I golfed with once hit his ball far right, near or over the out-of-bounds stakes, Jack says. I suggested he hit a provisional ball, customary golf protocol. “No need to,” he said, sure he’d find his ball, having never hit a golf ball out of bounds before. We drove the cart along the path toward where he knew his ball was, but no ball could be seen. He then reached into his left pocket, found his auxiliary ball and dropped it when he thought I wasn’t looking. “Here it is,” he said, “I knew it wasn’t out of bounds,” Jack says. The guy was a billionaire, Jack says, who always complained about being hounded by the government for not paying his taxes.

There was a great guy once, I say to Jack, a Japanese poet named Ryokan. I’ve memorized one of his poems.

I say the poem to Jack, knowing it by heart—

My poems are not poems
And when you understand that my poems are not poems
Then we can talk about poetry

I like the sound of it, Jack says, though I’m not sure what it means.
I don’t think we’re meant to know what it means, I say to Jack. The meaning is all in the feeling.

Everything has to mean something, Jack says.

I suppose you’re right, I say, I suppose Ryokan means golf is full of characters who don’t really think much about what they’re doing but don’t know what else to do. They’re either having fun or trying to live up to some ideal that’s either worth living up to or isn’t. But that’s only a guess.

The Ryokan poem is negative and positive in its extremes, Jack says. It’s like someone talking in my backswing—I may not know what they’re saying but the sound of their voice is more than enough to get my attention.
Nothing’s as easy as it looks, it’s the most difficult thing in the world. We either rise to the occasion or sink a little further each time we try. I seem to prefer the sinking, it suits all two sides of me, though nothing will ever live up to the old standards of heaven and hell. Heaven has the lighter touch, but the time I’ve spent in hell stands out as the time I most remember; in hell I feel most alive. But is it really hell or only a simulation?

The joy, when there is joy, is front loaded toward the beginning when there’s actually still time to get the bugs out. I dawdled, I once admitted to Jack, and drank and fornicated and made money accordingly, the usual course of a man’s life whether in the city or its countrysides. Yes golf ruined my life, but what incredible delights along the way! And memories too, too numerous to mention! BJ, who calls himself ‘worst golfer in the world’, playing the back nine with only his putter. Hackin’ Bob hitting balls on the range for 2 hours before his tee-time and then collapsing on the second hole from back pain, writhing on the ground like the upside-down insect we think he looks like, kicking his legs and flopping around on the tee-box. O to to be in the presence of such genius, to feel that alive once again!
This morning on Hole 13 of all places, my ball comes to rest in the abyss. There needs to be a ruling, as there is from time to time in any game of chance or skill: the abyss, as I’ve defined it, is either a place where the ball belongs or does not belong, this being one of the problems with man-made borders: the question is, who gets to decide?

It’s this very morning, the morning in question, the one I now speak of, when I’m seized by a unexpectedly specific profundity while playing golf alone: no one really knows anything, that all that can be known even by the most enlightened among us is a semblance of knowing, a sly little pinprick that opens ever so slightly to point vaguely toward the path between cause and effect. This profundity, if that’s what it is—and I’m not saying it is—felt so profound it had to be true in the privately thrilling way a suddenly revealed truth is true: that all that can be known, even by the most enlightened among us, and I don’t count myself among the enlightened necessarily, is only some microscopic semblance of knowing, and not the eternal guiding light as once thought and believed.

It feels now like I’m zeroing in on the ending, the ending only I can create, in imitation of other endings of course and with trace amounts of imitation left over from the ending of