Why Catalpa?

When choosing a title for our magazine, we wanted a name that would accurately and ethically represent our publication, a graduate magazine geared toward exploring curious perspectives rooted in the South—particularly Chattanooga. After much debate, we decided to name our new magazine *Catalpa*, the term for a flowering deciduous tree commonly found in the South. The word catalpa is derived from the term, kutuhlpa, the Muscogee word for “tree” which means “winged head.” It has been called Indian bean tree for the long pods it produces and caterpillar tree because it attracts the sphinx moth, whose caterpillars’ sometimes ravage the leaves. European settlers, at one time, thought the roots were poisonous and at other times took advantage of the tree’s medicinal qualities (from snake bite antidote to a cure for whooping cough). Today, catalpas and their hybrid sisters are primarily used as ornamental trees because of their silvery green leaves and showy, yet delicate flowers. We live in a hybrid place of old worries and new innovations, so the catalpa tree offers a metaphor for the South: deep roots and a diverse, beautiful, troublesome history.
FROM THE EDITOR

Creating a magazine that’s focused on and originating from the South is a complicated endeavor. The history of the region necessitates decisions—whose voices do we include? What stories can we tell? What stories should we tell?

The South is a region haunted by what Flannery O’Connor called its “well-publicized sins.” These sins—slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow, as well as the prejudice that for many is the subtext of every Southern-accented word—must be reckoned with by contemporary Southern writers. At the same time, the magical qualities of the South—its mysteries and beauties—also demand to be told.

When we, as a staff, discussed what we wanted to be as a publication, we returned to the metaphor of the front porch. The front porch as a symbolic space is integral to the Southern experience. It’s a space common to both rich and poor, black and white, male and female, and it is often where we go to enact that most Southern of traditions: storytelling.

*Catalpa* is rooted in the belief that the South is the sum of its voices—the weird and wonderful, polite and profane. We believe that these voices are best when they are brought together, whether this results in them complementing each other, confirming each other, or challenging each other.

We want this magazine to be a front porch for our readers—a space to mostly listen, but also, perhaps, to speak up and share their stories as well. Welcome to our front porch; we hope you like it.
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On the Cover:
“B&E” by Alex Plaumann
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Faith Jones is a corporate communicator by day and staff editor/writer by night. She’ll probably shed a tear if you don’t believe in the Oxford comma. As a child, she spent time rolling down the hills of Tennessee, riding a tractor, and cheering for the Volunteers. Scout, her trusty dog sidekick, chews on her bone while Faith writes at home and frequently convinces her to get outside. Faith is a first generation college and graduate student with hopes of helping people communicate their ideas in the best way possible.

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Jenna Lacey is a first-generation Southerner. Depending on who she spends time with, her accent ranges from upstate-New York Yankee to born-and-bred Tennessean. Her hobbies include writing, reasoning with toddlers, and sneaking her puppy into coffee shops. Her mom likes to compare her to Amy Schumer, and she still isn’t sure if this is an insult or a compliment. She is a first-year grad student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Someday, she might even graduate. This is her first publication and venture into the world of journalism.

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Daniel Giraldo is a poet and essayist currently residing in Tennessee. His poems have been published in Frontage Road and Sequoya Review, among others. He currently works as assistant to the managing editor for the international journal, Applied Environmental Education and Communication. He is often surrounded by good food and farm animals, and is a veteran of the United States Navy.

Alex Plaumann grew up in Massachusetts and studied Journalism at the University of Arizona. He may not be a traditional southerner, but he certainly has honed his writing, photography, and design skills while studying Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. On the off chance that Alex isn’t busy working or writing, you may be able to find him out wandering around Chattanooga.

Elaine Ruby Gunn is a first-year graduate student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Raised in Music City, she now calls Chattanooga her home. When she isn’t frantically revising a writing project, she can be found in the restaurant kitchen whipping up some Southern comfort food. If you’re missing a pen, it’s probably behind her ear. With a laugh, her dry humor and sarcasm should do the trick.

Shana DuBois received her master’s in English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Writing from The University of Tennessee Chattanooga. A freelance writer, proofreader, and photographer, she fills her days with books and farm animals.

Layton Woods has been photographed roaming the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga campus. When not sleeping, he can be found hunched over a mechanical keyboard, staring at a blank document page. If spotted, avoid eye contact and back away slowly. Do not engage in topics such as fandom, John Donne, or Bob’s Burgers.

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Michael Fuller was raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, and now attends Covenant College in Georgia. After graduating in May 2017, Michael intends to remain in the Chattanooga area. He has enjoyed photography since he was twelve.

Paul Luikart’s work has appeared in numerous literary magazines around the country. His first collection of short stories, Animal Heart, was released in May 2016 by Hyberborea Publishing. He graduated with his MFA from Seattle Pacific University. He and his family live in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Julia Wilhelm is a southeast Tennessee native whose wanderlust extends way beyond Southern borders. By day, she’s a communicator for a Fortune 500 company. The rest of the time, she loves spending time with her boyfriend, friends and family, falling deep into a rabbit hole of a new show or movie, and snuggling with her French bulldog, Sassy.

Julie Sumner has been writing poetry for more than ten years. Her works have been published in The Behemoth, Catapult, and Vanderbilt Medical Center’s House Organ. Her first chapbook, Flight Path, was published in 2014. A selection of Julie’s poems was chosen as the Best Overall Submission at the 2015 Indiana Faith and Writing Conference. She is currently a member of the Humanities in Medicine Working Group at the Vanderbilt Center for Biomedical Ethics and Society. In March 2017, Julie began pursuing her MFA in Poetry at Seattle Pacific University.

Cynthia Robinson Young is originally from Newark, New Jersey, but after college she relocated with her family to the California Bay Area. She currently lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee. After receiving her master’s at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, she became an adjunct professor in exceptional education at Covenant College in Georgia. She has been published in several journals, including Poetry South, Songs of Eretz Poetry Review, and Sixfold. She is a recent finalist in the Blue Light Press Chapbook Contest, and she is currently working on a novel and genealogical book of poems.
I t is after dark when you get there. The hills like cartoons rise out darker against the dark. You begin to wake up because of the sharper turns, and then you sit up when the tires leave paved road and hit gravel. The car vibrates running over the cow-guards, signaling the final stretch. You have been transported in the night. And doors are thrown open and the farm dog jumps up on you. A long “Hey” comes from the porch and you embrace a tall, bony man and an obese, short woman. They are your grandparents.

Climbing up the almost vertical stairs covered by green carpet, you enter the room with red carpet and wood panel walls. You get the futon with the Garfield comforter. That night maybe you dream about a person you don’t know, but you probably don’t dream at all, lulled by the box fans in each open window. In the morning the landscape becomes clear and you remember the details you had begun to forget: how the barn is pinker than red, the difference between store-bought and farm-fresh eggs, that your grandma never talks but yells.

You re-acquaint yourself to the land as from past trips, remembering old games and imaginings, and creating new ones. That one room in the barn is no longer a prison but a secret hideout, and that crick that dried up is no longer a lush river but a barren land and you must search for water. Some pets have died and new ones are hanging around. No more Mollys or Blues instead there are Suzie Qs and Barnyards. You don’t take as much interest in the farm animals as you did before, and this will be even truer next time you visit.

And you think nothing about this place you call “The Farm” will change. Maybe you won’t come back for longer in between each visit, but it will stay the same. It has to. It has to because it’s separate from the rest of the world and not just separate but otherworldly—it’s spiritual.
It is after dark when you get there. It has been a long time since the last trip. This time you are an adult and drive there in your own car. The hills look interesting but don’t awe you. You notice the political campaign signs and judge the people who live in the hills. This time you are not transported, but like a rite of passage you journey there on your own and some of the magic fades as you fill in the map. You wish you didn’t but you begin to feel disappointment. As you reach the gravel drive you notice a dog chained to a post in the headlights. The first thing your grandfather tells you is his dog got run over last week, found dead on the side of the road.

And you also feel dread, knowing that the place has changed, and you have too.

Once more, the light reveals the details you forgot. You do not like what you see. Homemade biscuits are replaced with frozen ones; your grandparents have discovered Netflix, and they watch in separate rooms; the pond has almost dried up and is choked by cattails. There are meds and heating pads and canes in every room, and the fridge is full of insulin vials—both for your grandma and her diabetic dog.

You want to explore the attic but hundreds of flies buzz and bang against the panes and curtains. Dead corn stalks stand in the garden with shriveled corn that was never picked, surrounded by undergrowth of rotting tomatoes still on the vine—unharvested remnants from past crops like apparitions. So you set out to re-acquaint yourself with the land, but this time you know it won’t be easy. It has been a long time.

This time you know that your grandparents are going to sell. For years now they leave the place from Thanksgiving to Easter, and it begins to have the air of something abandoned. Your dad tries to start things—mowers, cars, weed whackers—but they have not been used in a long time. Stinkbugs spill from the weed whacker, from the nooks they have crawled in, and struggle in the grass. Like the stinkbugs a winter, so they go to Florida.

You and your brother don’t make it far because the fields are so overgrown with briars you cannot walk through. You settle on a walk through the woods, and your brother stops to pull out a switchblade.

“Leave your mark,” he says and scratches “JF” into a birch.
But this bothers you. You begin to ask yourself what marks you have left behind over the past twenty years. Did you even leave any? You can’t think of any physical evidence you have left in this place, except for the penny you stuck into the thumbhole of the upstairs closet door years ago.

You decide you don’t care about carving your initials into a tree because you hope place isn’t as forgetful as that, that somehow it remembers its past. Like the vegetables in the garden that grew back from habit, from being sown year after year, some things take a while to be utterly erased, smoothed out. Some things still linger.

What is left?

When The Farm is sold, or abandoned, or bulldozed, will it remember the barn before it lies, sticking up like the skeletons from slaughtered cows in the pasture? Will it remember the lifetime your grandparents dedicated to the land? Will it remember you?

Like smears on glass revealed in the steam of a hot shower, secret messages are everywhere. People and things sink into the landscape where they are absorbed like carbon paper and recorded. The past is not so separate from the present. You were not always sure of this but your mother has told you about her ghosts. She sees them sometimes, she says. She’s your mother so you believe her because you know she feels things better than others. Sometimes the ghosts appear to her in dreams and other times in her waking presence.

Your mother tells you a ghost story: once, at The Farm, there was one standing at the top of the stairs. It was a woman and she was old and just standing there at the top of the stairs. My mother recalls that the two women simply exchanged glances. You never noticed these things about The Farm before and you are glad of it.

Even still, you know that your mother isn’t the only one with ghosts. People carry their pasts with them, as does the land. You know it though you always feel the universe growing disordered. You feel the past like a fading imprint despite the insects and the weeds and the death that come creeping in.
handwritten

JULIE SUMNER

Write the word light—
see how your thumb and index finger wave
as flashes on the surface of moving water,
muscles, ligaments, tendons bobbing
as the ‘i’ is dotted, the ‘t’ is crossed,
and somewhere in the forest of nerves,
that one particular strike of lightning
spiders across your interior night,
shining through every particle
of your own shadowed body
each time you write the word light.
GOOD LORD willing
An uncanny salvage yard
The engine of my boss’ pickup truck, a faded blue Chevrolet 1500, roared to life and we set out towards Deck’s Glassware. I’d never been. After a few minutes of driving through town, we made the right turn from East 23rd onto Dodds Avenue. We headed farther east, deeper into Chattanooga’s neglected neighborhoods. Homes with bowed front porches sit beside industrial warehouses, some abandoned and some in use. Slowly, the streets became more residential, the clusters of houses denser, and I was filled with excitement—a strange sensation given we were on our way to a glassware salvage yard. Still, the odd stories I’d heard of Deck’s were told with such reverence that I couldn’t wait to experience it for myself. About fifteen minutes after setting out, we pulled off the road and parked in front of a moderately sized brick building. In the summer months, the front door is left open, which helps circulate the stale, cigarette-laden air. Inside, vaguely organized dishes of all shapes and sizes fill every available surface, making the space feel more like a roadside yard sale than a business. A few steps deeper and the room opens up to reveal more shelves, again overflowing with vintage mugs, Pyrex, and beer glasses. From behind a desk covered by papers, coffee cups, and an ashtray comes the voice of Chester, the store’s owner. “Hey, dad,” he smiles. An American flag covers the window behind his desk. I’ve been going back since.

Off the building’s left side extends a pitched roof warehouse—watermarks drip down the front, causing the white paint to chip and gray. Entering the dark, cool space generally excites the pigeons who have found their way in through gaps in the walls and ceiling. In a back corner of the warehouse, sunlight spills onto a labyrinth of broken plates and bowls. “The roof fell in the back; you saw that,” he asks. I nod that I did. “What am I going to do about that? I’ve got a guy coming to look at it soon. The trusses are still good, though.”

Milling through the stacks of plates and bowls, it’s likely you’d find a something that catches your eye; far less likely, though, that the others like it will be nearby. Thankfully, Chester has a pretty good sense of what’s back there, so in the (very) likely event the other dishes in the set aren’t immediately apparent, he can point you in the right direction.

A few days before our interview, I went to ask Chester if he had some free time to chat. He said he was free the following Monday. Before leaving, I grab two small bowls and a tall, cream colored vase—just wide enough to fit the stems of one or two flowers and a good gift, I thought. It’s difficult to leave Deck’s empty handed. Realizing I didn’t have any cash with me, I turned to put the items back. He casually urged me to go ahead and take them, saying, “Shit, three dollars ain’t going to make or break me, and I ain’t about to run a card for three bucks.” I told him I would bring him cash when I came back Monday. “I know you will, dad,” he smiled.

After talking with Chester for any amount of time, it becomes apparent that he believes greed to be a major problem in America. As a way of combating this, he makes sure to work hard and wait patiently for opportunities to come his way. He’s never quite sure who will walk through the door. Chester is a man with a “good Lord willing” attitude who wishes to do right by everyone he encounters.

At sixty-two, Chester is weathered but not calloused. His bright blue eyes light up as he launches into sprawling, tangent filled narratives to answer each question I ask.

Chester isn’t worried about what the future holds. Whether it’s china, or happiness, he can salvage it.
Chester works mornings (7:30–11:30 a.m.) at a nearby horse farm to make a little extra money. It was the first job he ever had, actually. Chester tells me about his job, then and now. “I just take care of the horses,” he explains. A pair of mud covered work boots sit behind him. “I get the horses ready, and I put them up,” he says. The phone rings and Chester answers. “This guy’s a horse trainer, and he’s out of Michigan,” Chester tells me, looking up from the phone. He was negotiating feed prices. “I like him,” Chester mentions, “really good with a horse.” For Chester, being good with a horse is synonymous to being good with people. With no explanation, Chester told me that, in his opinion, people and horses aren’t so different.

In 1980, Chester, a Rossville, GA, native, was living in Santa Cruz, California when he got a phone call from his father saying he needed help at his store. Business at Deck’s was going well, and Chester was needed to help manage wholesale accounts and tend to the store. Chester’s father built the business by word of mouth, a tactic that Chester still values highly. “You never know—in business you never know what the good Lord is going to send you,” Chester explains, taking a drag off his cigarette. “We’d trade anything,” Chester explained as he told me how his father would salvage and sell anything, from overstock candy to woolen blankets, “My old man was smart. I’m dumb as hell.” Eventually, Deck’s landed on dishware because of a connection built with a factory in New York that sold silver tray sets. From there, the business grew to sell other salvage dishes. Five years after Chester returned home to work, his father died, and left him the business. Things went well until the past few years, when the factory in New York shut down. Now, times are tougher. Chester’s making it work, though. He has adopted a peaceful attitude about his situation. When asked if he feels like giving up, he responds emphatically, “Hell, no… I’ll let the good Lord take me.”

After a couple of hours of walking around and talking with Chester, I tell him that I appreciate his time and that I feel like his place has a story—a special kind of history. “Story? Where’s it at?” he questions. I clarify, telling him that he is the story. “Oh, shit, dad. I thought you meant there was the theme: “From having somethin’ to not having nothing,” following it with, “that’s a hell of a damn way to go.”

Chester isn’t worried about what the future holds. Whether it’s china, or happiness, he can salvage it. “Good Lord willing I’ll make it. I’ll make it with or without this place. If I lose it all, it’s no problem. If I’ve still got my health, I’ve got it all.”
They walk in threes through parks and city streets.
Their hips move to a samba in their soul.
They stride in syncopation to the beats,
waiting for safe adventure to unfold.

Young unsuckled breasts point to the sky,
turning heads from cars in even rhythm.
They do not know the power it supplies
until their breasts point downward toward their children.

But seasoned women know about these powers,
once innocent, and so naively used
until we learned that men possessed night hours,
and were so defiled, there was no more to lose.

We walk in threes now for a different reason—
the streets, the night commit to females, treason.
In an eager voice crackling through a megaphone, the names of this year’s prizewinners are read: Candy, Charlie, Jackson, Scout. The list goes on, each name followed by the category it won: “youngest,” “best ears,” “best coat,” or “best face.” Everyone gasps as they hear who traveled farthest for the day: Einstein, all the way from Macon.

The grand prize, an award of great prestige, is Queen of the Parade. It is announced last, right before the parade begins. This year, the award goes to Thistle MacDougall, one of three sisters, all of whom are wearing artificial autumn leaves in garlands around their necks. On her tiny legs, Thistle moves to the front to start the procession. Behind her, the grand marshal, Bob Wright, holds a sign: St. Elmo Corgi Parade.

Amusing in its specificity, the St. Elmo Corgi Parade brings all of the St. Elmo corgis and their owners into the streets of the neighborhood each fall. Spectators watch as corgis usher in the season with waddling steps, parading barely half a block from a St. Elmo flower shop to the base of the Lookout Mountain Incline Railway and back again. The parade keeps its shape on the first leg as the corgis, bemused at their sudden fame, walk to the Incline. On the way back, however, it is interrupted and scattered as children rush in to pet the corgis, unable to resist.

This is my first time at the Corgi Parade, though I’m entering my second year as a resident of St. Elmo. I fell in love with the neighborhood in college, as I would drive through its wide streets on the way from my college campus on Lookout Mountain to downtown Chattanooga. It is charming in an unpolished way, and the houses reflect the variety of its residents. A gracious Tudor-style cottage with trimmed hedges and blooming wisteria lives beside a jarringly purple-painted folk-Victorian with underwear hanging out front on the line. If character is desired, St. Elmo provides that in abundance.

Neighborhood character is desirable because it can’t be manufactured. Unlike the paint-fresh housing developments springing up steadily in Chattanooga, St. Elmo’s homes have had decades to absorb the personalities of their many owners. Some would argue that new developments are necessary as Chattanooga attracts new residents, and splashy titles for the city like Outdoor Magazine’s “Best Town” and “Gig City,” match well with shiny new homes. This is the newest incarnation of a city that has undergone many, and in all of them, St. Elmo has played a part. Cradled in the dip between Lookout Mountain and Hawkins Ridge, this neighborhood was born from yellow fever and lives because of corgis.
was more than struggling. The average cost of a house was between $30,000 to $35,000. There was one slumlord that owned about forty properties, some of which were the largest and oldest houses in St. Elmo, which he divided into as many apartments as he could fit into them. In one particularly beautiful house that used to sit on the corner of Alabama and 45th Street, he just rented individual rooms out by the week with a common shared bathroom.” The neighborhood had a high crime rate, and the historic homes were in disrepair. But people like Andy moved in nonetheless. A dangerous, dilapidated neighborhood had at least one advantage: cheap houses. People like Andy could also see potential. He says that he was drawn to live there because he wanted to raise his children in a neighborhood that was “incredibly diverse,” and he saw the potential for restoring one of these historic homes.

Thankfully, Andy wasn’t the only one. Though a group called the St. Elmo Improvement League had existed since the 1960s, the efforts of this group, now called the Community Association of Historic St. Elmo (CAHSE), began in earnest in the late 80s and 90s to bring life back into the neighborhood. Chattanooga was starting to heal as city leaders cleaned the polluted river and sought renewed business interest. By focusing on cleaning the river from pollutants, and building a 22-mile greenway along the river, downtown Chattanooga was transformed. More people walking along the river brought more development, which brought more.

During the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, residents of Chattanooga fled the city proper to avoid infection. Among the 12,000 that left the city, many moved up Lookout Mountain, necessitating a short route from the mountain to the city. The St. Elmo Turnpike was built in 1879, and a neighborhood began to grow in this space between sickness and health. Eventually, fever abated, and the city returned to normal, but St. Elmo remained and kept growing. Around this time, Chattanooga began to develop as an industrial center. Unlike other cities in the South that were based on agriculture, Chattanooga was a hub of manufacturing. The city enjoyed this status for decades, and many who worked in these growing industries made St. Elmo their home. Unfortunately, manufacturing grew too recklessly, polluting the Tennessee River at Chattanooga’s heart. This time, infection hurt St. Elmo as it radiated outward from the river. Families left and paint peeled off of the homes’ Victorian exteriors. By the 1970s St. Elmo was only a sad suburb of what Walter Cronkite dubbed “The Dirtiest City in America.”

My parents went to college on Lookout Mountain in the eighties. Whereas I, 20 years later, would meander through St. Elmo’s streets, they would speed through the neighborhood quickly, doors locked, on the way to the Pickle Barrel for burgers. The eighties were not a good time for St. Elmo. Resident Andy Mendonsa shares what the neighborhood was like at the time, saying, “When my wife Gloria and I moved to St. Elmo in 1985, this was a neighborhood that
Neighborhood character is desirable because it can’t be manufactured.

More importantly, the Fall Festival and its corgis brought people into the neighborhood, and some of them stayed. The 1990s were a time of rebirth for the neighborhood as families moved into its old homes to raise children, plant gardens, and get to know their neighbors. Slowly, St. Elmo became a place where families could go on long walks at dusk and leave their fragile Victorian windows open. This change is good. It is good for women who want to go for a run alone and not be afraid. It is good for kids who want to leave their bikes outside overnight and find them untouched in the morning. A decrease in crime is good for everyone. But the implications of this are more nuanced because when a neighborhood with beautiful, historic homes and tree-lined avenues loses its One Big Problem, suddenly everybody wants a piece, and the pieces get pricey.

I still get the occasional “Isn’t it dangerous?” when I tell longtime Chattanoogans where I live. Yes, I do know more than one neighbor whose house and car have been broken into, and even one who was attacked at her door when going in at night. Those who are new to Chattanooga, however, usually ask me how I can afford rent. I pay triple on my apartment what a friend of mine paid when she lived here five years ago. This hints at the next epidemic that could harm St. Elmo. As gentrification levels other Chattanooga neighborhoods, bringing in fresh new buildings and new people, St. Elmo neighbors are fighting to protect their home. In the fall of 2015, St. Elmo neighbors attended a city council meeting to protest a building project that would replace all the trees on Hawkins Ridge—pine, poplar, birch, and catalpa—with mass-produced “green” homes.

I followed this story with interest and a surprising amount of emotion through the St. Elmo email list. The email list is a digital space for St. Elmo neighbors to share life with each other, whatever that looks like from day to day. Often it is through emails with titles like, “Free mattress on curb” and “Just baked cinnamon rolls if interested.” Also ones like “Suspicious man near 45th and Tennessee Ave,” and “Mail delivery issues.” When the neighborhood is threatened how-
ever, the emails are more urgent. Recently, one titled “Terrorism on Old Mountain Road and 39th” included pictures of neighborhood trees destroyed by developers, and gave instructions on how to contact the mayor with complaints. There were over fifty replies.

While the neighborhood clearly cares about self-preservation, gentrification is a powerful force. In the fall of 2016, the St. Elmo Body Shop closed its doors and hung up a huge sign: “After 70 years of business, we are being FORCED to move.” The neighborhood grocery store just underwent a facelift, and now includes a salad bar and all-organic produce options. The prices are higher. Neighborhoods change; that fact itself is not sad. The problem is when residents have to leave homes they love because they can no longer afford them. Andy Mendonsa believes that as long as neighbors talk to each other and preserve their shared history, the neighborhood will survive. He says, “Sadly, one of the things that has happened in St. Elmo today is the absence of any ongoing dialogue about its historic significance and the ways that we, as her residents, should be preserving it rather than being almost solely focused on preserving our own personal ways of life, regardless of how it affects our neighbors and our neighborhood both now and for future generations.”

There were many people at this year’s Corgi Parade, most of them proud St. Elmites celebrating their neighborhood mascot. Midway through the parade route, the bedecked corgis passed a sculpture that was recently erected outside of a St. Elmo restaurant. The sculpture is a large bronze circle, with small figures around the circumference telling the history of the neighborhood. Among the fifty key figures represented on the statue, one is a corgi. I hope that gentrification does not harm St. Elmo, but I believe that my neighbors will fight for their home. They will do it through lobbying and petitioning and voting and planning, but also through corgi parades.
The people of the Appalachian Mountains are as dedicated to defending religious traditions as they are moonshine and coal mines.

“Take that which you think is different, and try to understand it,” he said of his motivation.

In his early years at UTC, Hood overheard other professors discussing the snake-handlers in the surrounding mountains. “They called them ignorant, back-woods people,” Hood recalled, “so, I just asked them, ‘Have you ever been to a service?’” His interests rooted in psychology and religious studies, Hood felt the obligation to destroy such stereotypes and to promote respect for the Appalachian community—specifically the Holiness congregation.

Often overlooked and readily rejected, the snake-handling practice can be traced back to White Oak Mountain around 1910, when George Hensley took the gospel of Mark literally and felt the call to proclaim that all Christians should handle venomous snakes in order to activate their faith. Branching off from the Church of God, several followed Hensley and his literal interpretation of Mark 16: “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (KJV). This was the start of the Holiness tradition.

In his 30 years of research, Hood has followed three generations. “These people don’t survive by conversion,” Hood said, “but by maintaining their children in the faith.” Though the tradition is very much alive, over 100 deaths have been documented due to snake bites, three recorded personally by Hood and Williamson. These deaths are devastating for the Appalachian community, Holiness or not. In services held about five times a week, both adults and
children are no less dedicated to their faith than their work, completely invested in the snake-handling tradition. While most members are employed at local coal mines or other laborious jobs, exhaustion isn’t an option after work. “It’s cyclical,” he explained. “Church absorbs their so-called free time.”

In his 30 years of investment, Hood tells of the Holiness tradition as if it is his own. “I have never been dishonest with them; I don’t want to mock their faith,” confessed the professor. “I tell their story.”

With multiple publications presenting this unique element of Appalachian culture, Hood and Williamson have kept true to their word. Unique to his research is his dedication to the flourishing of the church; Hood has testified in court on multiple occasions, as one of the goals of his research is to remove laws that prohibit the snake-handling practice. With a Christian church on nearly every corner in the South, it’s hard to believe that any sector of the Christian tradition experiences religious discrimination. West Virginia, however, is the only state in the Appalachian region that doesn’t legally pose a threat to snake handlers. All other surrounding states have outlawed the handling of snakes for religious purposes, under the claim that it is too high a risk. Georgia and North Carolina have even passed laws that would accuse the evangelist of the Gospel as a murderer if a church member died as a result of handling under the speaker’s influence.

“High risk in the secular community is not disputed,” noted Hood, sarcastically gesturing to the busy street outside of his office, “but submitting to this bias against religion requires people to risk their salvation.”

Hood’s goal is not to persuade anyone of the power of snake handling: “I’ve never handled a snake, never will.” Instead, he wishes to display the strength of these people, “characterizing these people as ‘backwoods, ignorant people’ falsifies their faith.” Hood and the Holiness project is well on its way to exposing the façade of religious freedom in the South. Over his years of research, documentary crews from Canada and Australia have traveled to stay up to date on Hood’s work with the snake handlers. Work to preserve these documents began in 2013 in UTC’s Special Collections Department and is funded through a grant provided by the UC Foundation.

“We hope this is a springboard for [Hood] and I to get bigger external funding,” stated Carolyn Runyon, Director of UTC Special Collections.

The grant awarded to this project will cover the digitization of nearly 200 of Hood and Williamson’s original recordings. Runyon’s personal goal for the project is to use metadata to make the material as researchable as possible. According to Hood, UTC now holds the largest data collection of Appalachian Holiness churches.

Amidst persecution, the Holiness church continues to pursue holiness. In the corner of Hood’s office sits a dark wooden box, a gifted token of thanks that once held the slithering embodiments of faith. Engraved on the box are the words “Wait on God.” This refers to the members’ commitment to handle snakes only out of obedience to God. The church’s relentless drive to wait on God will not be stopped by man or law.
In the middle of a neighborhood cemetery, 
amid the famous ghosts who could walk there 
if they chose to rise again, 
stands a black tree, that, on sultry summer days 
is black onyx 
against an indigo sky, 
surrounded by Weeping Willows 
mourning, Spanish moss draping trees 
like haunted remains. 

Victorian city park more than resting place, 
where Dogwood and Magnolia lined paths weave 
through the cemetery like veins, 
a depot for those temporarily at rest. There, 
among the green palette of trees 
as diverse as the souls that lie beneath them, 
African slaves buried alongside 
their great-great grandsons, Black and free, yet 
prematurely cut down by racism, poverty, 
and now, each other, 
still segregated even in death, 
yet lying with their slave owners in the same southern dirt, 
just over the hill, a few plots away. 

This place for the dead, 
more reminiscent of Eden before the Fall 
than Savannah’s gardens of Good and Evil, 
except for the Black Tree 
eternally proud in the middle 
of it all, isolated and alone.
Families visiting the remains
of their memories
have given this tree a name:

Tiu-gr-gv-nah-ge,
L’abre Noir,
Der Schwarze Baum,
El Arbol Negro,
even The Nigger Tree.

It surrounds itself in fog, sometimes
mistaken for a shadow,
sometimes not seen at all.

Just before winter, its leaves fly away
like black crows departing,
leaving behind bare, arthritic fingers

pointing toward the earth,
a grassless circle of tarnished red clay,
hollow underneath.
What Hill Are You Willing to Die On?

An interview with two poets

On an afternoon in April, Faith Jones (a Catapult staff editor) and I sat down with Aaron Quinn and Cynthia Robinson Young to discuss their poetry. Cynthia, a special education teacher originally from Newark, NJ, and Aaron, a writer from Bean Station, TN, who works evenings at a local homeless shelter, hit it off almost immediately. We talked about tomato sandwiches and the ghosts that haunt the South.

When sifting through the submissions for Catalpa’s first issue, our staff quickly realized that many of them were poems. Our intention wasn’t to be a literary magazine—it still isn’t—and although the submitted poems were good, we struggled with how best to include them, or whether we should include them at all. We noticed that Aaron’s and Cynthia’s works seemed to address similar topics, dealing with themes of racism, gentrification, and Southern identity. We were intrigued. We wanted to know more about them, and about what drove them, as Southern writers, to confront the issues present in their work.

Aaron and Cynthia share that they are both Southern writers. But they have different backgrounds and identities. Aaron approaches the South with the perspective of a white man from a tiny Southern town, bearing the burden of the ugly ghosts of Southern history. Cynthia approaches the South as an African-American woman who has lived in other regions—the northeast and west—but interacts with Southern ghosts of her own. Considering their different perspectives, we wanted to know what Cynthia and Aaron might agree on or disagree on when it came to the South and Southern writing.

We were faced with some difficult decisions: how could we put two people with such different perspectives in conversation together without making the project come across as tainted and insincere—or worse, inflammatory? In his column in the summer 2015 issue of Oxford American, Southern food writer John T. Edge engages with New Orleans chef and “provocateur” Tunde Wey. The article is difficult. Edge offers half of his column to Wey, with which Wey asks the question: “What will you willingly give up to ensure the Southern food narrative services properly and fully the contributions of black Southerners?” Edge and Wey’s column is heavy but redemptive. And although we didn’t really expect to encounter something quite as heavy and challenging as that column, we couldn’t be entirely sure that it wouldn’t be. There was still the fear that, to borrow Wey’s words, our idea was “scrubbed with a dirty washcloth.” So, for weeks we debated. It sounds dramatic—it kind of was. We decided that we would just ask them what they thought about the idea. What could it hurt? To our surprise, they both agreed—what’s more, they seemed genuinely excited.
You both enjoy Southern writing—what drew you to that genre?

**Cynthia:** My family. They’re all from North Carolina and Georgia, so I was raised by Southerners. When I came back to the South, I felt like everything that I was raised on was from the South. I feel like I’m a misplaced Southerner. Even in California, I got *Southern Living* magazine. I love the South.

**Aaron:** I grew up in a town that didn’t even have a red light. I read *As I Lay Dying*, got obsessed with Faulkner, and never really left Southern literature. [It got] to the point where, when people gave me other [books], they’d be like “Okay, Aaron. There’s literature other than people who write in the South.” But that’s my reality. Like, I grew up eating tomato sandwiches.

**Cynthia:** So that’s a Southern thing—tomato sandwiches?

**Aaron:** I hope so—I think even in my poetry that’s why I write so much about tomatoes. It’s a visual I grew up with.

**Cynthia:** I’m finding out more and more that, yeah, I am a Southerner.

**Is it that sort of regional twist that draws you to poetry?**

**Cynthia:** I found my voice in Southern writing first. I feel like I was raised by Southerners, so that’s the way I think. When I write dialogue, it just comes out like that.

**Aaron:** All these different voices—Southern literature made the most sense to me. It influenced so much of my writing—or I hope it has influenced my writing. I tried avoiding Southern writing for so long. I was starved for “culture,” and when I started embracing Southern literature, I realized how rich the South was in its own culture. It’s very didactic in some ways because it teaches you as you grow up about the pace of life and how to treat other people—the good side of Southern culture does that. I think you have to be comfortable with the dark side of it, too. And I finally got to the point where I’m comfortable with my past in relation to my ancestors. That was important, too, because for me to say I’m a straight, Southern, white male—there’s a lot that goes into that.

**Cynthia:** Yeah, that’s loaded.

**Aaron:** It’s basically, “Well, you’ve created most of the hatred in America.” Yes, I have. Now I can fully embrace my Southern identity because I don’t have to run from the shadows that always follow us around, if we’re honest about it.

**Cynthia:** Yeah, the shadows—I’m going to move it into the word ghost, because of one of the things my kids always say: “Mom, you’re always talking about ghosts.” I feel it here. One of my sons moved to Augusta (GA), and we were downtown. It was almost as if I could see the past while walking downtown. When I’m in California—I just went back—there are no ghosts there. I cannot feel anything. I like what you said: embracing both the light and the dark side. My family said that we left [the South] for a reason. When I was going back to Covenant [College] they said, “Are you crazy? We left there for a reason. Don’t go back.” They were really freaked out about me coming back. But there’s something that connects us back to our roots. It’s the good, the bad, and the ugly of it. I think that part of what makes Southern writing so rich is because it’s rich with shadows and ghosts we can see.

**Working in that realm, is there something in particular you hope that your readers will take away?**

**Cynthia:** Well, with what Aaron was saying, just being able to embrace it and be honest about it. I think that Southern writers really make an effort to be honest because we have a lot to be honest about. We have a lot to face, to repent, and we have a lot of healing that has to happen. I think our writing is a part of that healing.

**Aaron:** I love the terms “healing” and “repentance.” I think those are two heavy, buried terms that need to be brought [to] the surface. That’s part of my intention. What I want to do is say, “Come talk to me. Let me hear your story.” All I want to do is say, “I’m sorry.” There needs to be people who are willing to say, “I’m going to take this past on my shoulders,” and start telling people, “I am genuinely sorry.” What I want more than anything is to break bread with you, and not because you’re black or you’re dating someone of the same sex, but to restore common humanity. I teach creative writing at the shelter I work at every other Thursday, and normally, I start off by telling them the first thing I see is you’re black or white. I see it. That makes you beautiful and diverse.

**Cynthia:** That’s great and that’s important. Because with my interactions with white people, they’re like, “I don’t see you as black.” Well, you’re just saying you’re denying who I am.

**Aaron:** You see people that are black and white. One of the things that I fear inside of America is that we’re so afraid of other cultures that we’re not willing to let people have their own.
There are holes in tin roofs and rusted fixer uppers parked in overgrown lawns. Fight or flight tills up the suffocation that will surely come before the weekend is over. Boredom contorts its fat fingers over the overeager thought process. Even though stars are points that look like they have been whittled thin and the moon is too big to grab with the hand there is no room for the imagination to expand while looking down on Poor Valley. The speckled jacket on the warm fall trees wanted to control the mind like a good woman with a stout chest and a firm hand but the bickering between growth and stagnation tore imagination and familial rest asunder until the diesel engine could hop over pot holes while passing the doublewides and double lines that would give way to four lanes and named streets.

sweet suffocating home

Aaron Quinn
I want you to retain the identity of culture in your waking being, in your walking being, because it’s important.

**Cynthia:** I think there’s a hard line between people embracing culture and those who are trying to get a oneness within it. How do we stay one while being separate? That’s a struggle we can’t get to the end of. I believe that’s the desire of most Americans—we want to figure that out.

**Aaron:** Part of being from a small town is knowing that outsiders aren’t always welcome. And that’s part of the ghosts that hide in the dark. There’s an inner tribalism that wants us to be safe, and different makes us feel unsafe. In Small Town, Southern USA, the tendency to accept people that are different is not as prevalent as it is in other regions. I agree that there is a large part of America that wants to assimilate, but I think there’s a tendency in some parts of the South—and I don’t want to demonize all the South—but I do think there is that tendency to migrate to what you know. I basically come from an all-white county. My city is called “Bean Station.” It sounds white. I loved growing up there, but there was an adjustment moving from all-white Bean Station to almost all-white Cleveland, TN, and finally to more diversified Chattanooga. And I think that’s the beauty of literature: It helps us understand to bridge that gap—

**Cynthia:** [interjects] —In a safe space.

**Aaron:** Yeah. You didn’t always know if they were true or not, but it didn’t matter.

**Cynthia:** One of things I get attacked about from my family is I’ll write a poem and they’ll say it didn’t happen. I’m like, “I don’t care!” I’m trying to teach a truth in it. And that truth is true whether or not that happened at the end... That’s how I was raised: just tell the story. I don’t care if it’s true or not, just make it good. So if you have to throw stuff in, throw it in.

**Aaron:** I think that’s what I had to ask: “What do I like about poetry?” I like the story. That’s what was so important to me.

**So, we’ve been weaving around this, but if you had to boil it down: what is the responsibility of the Southern poet?**

**Cynthia:** I think we have to tell the truth. Represent our culture—the good, the bad, and the ugly. If you don’t face your demons, you’re always going to be afraid. There’s so much beauty in the South. There’s this element where—these are our roots.

**Aaron:** I think a lot of it, for me—and not to get overly spiritual, if there’s such a thing—I feel this huge responsibility of stewardship in relation to religion, [specifically,] my Christianity. I think God has given us this creation to steward, whether it’s through community or treating nature correctly. My responsibility starts right there. It’s my way of stewarding the little bit of the world I was given—

**Cynthia:** Right.

**Aaron:** I may, one day, move away from the South. I don’t know how that will happen. I’m not sure what my wife can say to get me to move away from it. But while I’m here, my responsibility is, how do I steward this? When Kanye West said, “Racism is still alive, they’re just re-concealing it,” it made me stop and say, “Wait a second. What does that mean?” Part of my evolution was to start asking: “Since it was re-concealed, have I done anything to help conceal racism to where we can’t deal with this? I want to do that through poetry.”

**Cynthia:** I think one thing is to always remember that if it’s not racism, it’s going to be something else. Like The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss, we’re always going to figure out how we’re better than somebody else. We’re always going to put down someone else. I don’t think it will ever go away. I think that we can be, as you said, stewards to try and help the healing.

**Aaron:** I think that’s part of the challenge, right? When you’re writing poetry, what battles do we choose?

**Cynthia:** Yeah. We talk about whatever we’re called to talk about. Whatever your passion is, that’s what you have to write about.

**Aaron:** I think that’s part of developing that, too. What hill are you willing to die on? Because you’re going to take criticism. I’m willing to die on the hill of racism, sexism, and spirituality.

**Cynthia:** That’s good. I think the hardest thing is figuring out how to love people. That’s what you sound like you’re talking about. How do you love everyone well through your work?

**Aaron:** Do you remember the moment where the fire of
writing got sparked?

Cynthia: Oh, this is hard. I didn’t like being a child. I needed an outlet. But I didn’t know I needed an outlet until I learned how to read. When I learned how to read—oh my gosh, everything everyone’s always said that sounds like it’s a cliché, it’s not. You can go to another world. You don’t have to deal with anything. So, I became in love with books and reading. And then, from that, I went to the library. There’s a book called So You Want to be a Writer? and I thought, “So you can actually read this book and become a writer?” That’s when I started.

Aaron: What age were you?

Cynthia: Oh, probably 13 when I realized I could actually be a writer.

Do you write any other genres or styles?

Cynthia: That’s a sad story. I didn’t embrace poetry at all. I always wanted to write a novel, and write a short story. I spent most of my life writing bad short stories that I thought were really good, but everyone said, “No, they’re not.” When I wrote poetry, people said, “You should be a poet.” I said, “I don’t want to be a poet. I want to write stories and novels.” Eventually, I started submitting poetry with the short stories. The short stories came back but the poetry stayed. I guess I should start walking down that aisle called poetry. Then, a couple of years ago, I heard about the NaNo thing. You know, you write a novel in a month? And I thought, “That’d be fun.” I tried to do the NaNo thing in July so that I could at least live through every day of July and know it happened. I ended up writing a novel that I really like.

You mentioned earlier that you were doing some projects with genealogy. Does that have something to do with the novel, or is that a separate project?

Cynthia: I went to New Jersey to see my family, and we were driving from Newark to South Jersey. My aunt was telling me the story of how our family migrated, and it was amazing. She died, and I came back for another funeral. I was telling my aunts and they would say, “That didn’t happen. She must have been starting her death at this point ‘cause there’s no way that that happened.” Well, I thought [her story] was good. [It] was the seed for the novel. If it’s true, then it’s really true. If it’s not, it’s a novel. That’s how that novel came to be. But now I’m wondering if it’s not done, obviously.

Aaron: I think I have six novels I’ve finished. I have to force myself to stop editing them; they’re never done in my mind. One of the things Stephen King said was “put it away for six months and then come back to it.” That’s what I tend to do.

Cynthia: I do that with my poetry. One of the other things I do, which is coming up tomorrow, is a poem-a-day. I love that one. You put out 30 poems. It doesn’t matter if it’s good or not, you’ve just got to do it. They give you a prompt a day. I always get something out of that.

Aaron: I don’t know what your process is like, but I feel like I hit a writer’s high, where the whole world is just opened up. My reality doesn’t exist. It doesn’t always happen at first—you’ve gotta keep pushing through. Then it just opens up. It’s a complete reality you’re living in. You can smell it; you can hear the characters talk; visually see what they’re saying. You can feel their emotions. It’s just beautiful. But, you have to keep pressing in, like you do running, and find that writer’s high—with novel writing, especially.

Cynthia: It’s another world. With poetry, my process is [that] I can’t just do it. When I get a poem, I get the whole poem.

Aaron: [For me], it’s usually it’s a word or an image. I feel like writing is exorcising something from me.

Cynthia: Well, [it’s] something that’s in there you didn’t know was there. It’s just got to come. I don’t know where it comes from; but, if it’s not there, it ain’t there. I think that we have to keep doing it, no matter what. So, if I’m not writing then I’ll be editing, revising things, or researching. One of the projects I’m working on right now is poems. It’s the story of my family, and it’s like a prose poem. I’m figuring out when to stop. I sit there and wait until I can hear the voice of that person and then when I hear it, I’m on it. She has a story to tell.

* A huge thanks to Faith Jones for accompanying me and helping me conduct and transcribe the interview.
back where

AARON QUINN

Back where the pines rained sap
and the rain brought manna,
there is room for the grasshopper
and fluttering wings of the June Bug.
The moonshine flowed before it was legal
and fried okra was always hot on the stove
after all the hands were washed.
The kids ran without shoes,
papa shot the gun in the hayfield,
and boys chased the girls for fun.
Tomatoes big enough to fit in the hands of gods,
bright candy red, gushed during sticky summer nights
while the grasshopper jumps in the overgrown grass.
Time is slow back where the pines rain sap
and the words were slower while the lake rippled waves
that carried the sons and daughters into the July afternoons.
When you’re inside a Captain D’s, you don’t typically think of highbrow ingredients and high-class cuisine. Your eyes are fixed on images of golden, deep-fried menu offerings. Your nose is taking in the delightful aroma seeping out from behind the counter—it reminds you of when Grandma would fry catfish in the kitchen. Your stomach growls at you angrily, suggesting you’re taking too long, and that another customer might jump ahead of you in line.

Chances are you’re in a hurry. This is fast food, after all. So it’s understandable that your senses have hijacked your mind and that you’re not thinking about where your meal is coming from or the amount of time and energy that went into getting each component of your fish sandwich together and in front of you. Food, in this context, is just fuel: cheap, affordable, and consumed hurriedly in large quantities.

Matthew Callahan wasn’t thinking about the elevated dimensions of food either when he worked at a Captain D’s in Cleveland, TN—the one off of APD 40. As a senior at Bradley Central High School, his only concerns were soccer, college, and Meghan, his high school sweetheart who would later become his wife. For a much younger Callahan, there wasn’t anything else; becoming a chef was the last thing on his mind—food choices and consumption rituals, even less so.

Today, seventeen years later, Callahan is both owner and chef of The Five Point Square, a farm-to-table restaurant in Cleveland. He thinks about food every day—especially its refined quality stemming from slow, caring cultivation and from friendly proximity. In an interview with Catalpa magazine, he recounts his culinary journey of transformation—one that took place in and out of the kitchen—and he explains why he’s such an avid proponent of the farm-to-table movement.

“Farm-to-table is about embracing what’s available,” Callahan says. “It’s about place and working with the seasons.”

Also known as farm-to-fork, farm-to-table is a restaurant concept turned social movement that promotes local food and area farms. It boasts transparency in agricultural practice as well as traceability of food origins. It’s about supporting farmers that you can actually talk to rather than industry conglomerates. You can thank the farm-to-table movement for promoting farmers’ markets and community farm shares.

One of the earliest restaurants to practice a farm-to-table philosophy was Chez Panisse (pronounced shay pah-nees), based in Berkeley, California. The restaurant was launched by food activist Alice Waters in 1971. Since then, several other similar establishments have opened across the Golden State, though the roots of the movement can be traced back, arguably, to the Green Revolution—a movement against chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Since then, chefs and farmers alike have been focusing on ethically sourced ingredients and taking steps in the direction of informed consumption.
Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food

A year before opening his restaurant, Callahan met Bertus, a South African farmer that had just made the move from Atlanta to Decatur, TN, with his wife. The couple was living in an unfinished cabin on several acres of untamed land. They’d only just begun making their rounds to local farmers’ markets with their first harvest of the season. That afternoon, on the corner of 1st and Parker, in an empty field now known as First Street Square in Cleveland, Bertus and Callahan planted the seed for a partnership that would continue to be fruitful for years to come.

“I wasn’t leaning towards that particular idea,” Callahan states, referring to his restaurant. “The concept actually found me.”

Noting his relationship with Bertus, he emphasizes that it was his food hero, the Chattanooga-based Chef Daniel Lindley, owner of Alleia and former owner of St. John’s, who initially introduced him to the concept. As the chef de cuisine at Alleia, a Chattanooga-based Italian restaurant, Callahan quickly realized that the entire eating experience could be made more appealing when restaurant patrons understood exactly where their food came from.

“Did you know that 40 percent of young adults don’t know that milk comes from cows?” Callahan asks rhetorically. He’s smiling, but shaking his head.

He’s referring to a 2012 study conducted in the UK. The study didn’t include Americans, but Callahan brings it up to relate to our own nation’s decline in knowledge concerning food. He blames the American food industrial complex—that is, supermarkets and fast-food chains. He calls them “one-stop shops”, likening them to gasoline stations.

This lack of traceability in food origins is a relatively new concept—and an alarming one at that. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly 60 percent of the nation was agrarian at the close of the nineteenth century. And for several decades afterward, subsistence farming was still a way of life. Opting to live away from the family farm has changed things dramatically. Innovations in transportation and refrigeration technologies inspired new ways to gain better mileage out of our tastebuds, adopting foodways we’ve become increasingly complacent in our tastes. This is especially apparent in the South, where we know what we like and like what we know.
from across the country and from overseas. Increased affordability of automobiles in the 1920s also helped fast food become synonymous with the open road. The subsequent introduction of interstates in the 1950s only bolstered these trends.

**The Price of Convenience**

Coincidentally, Callahan’s restaurant is situated inside of a renovated auto repair shop. He points to the garage door. “Fast food is what our nation eats on the go,” he says, “and it doesn’t seem like we’re slowing down anytime soon”—at least not with the current food system in place. Perhaps the initial thrust exerted by an accelerating America can be counterbalanced by the slowness derived from small, local farms.

“I still eat Taco Bell occasionally,” Callahan responds, when asked about his own fast-food habits. “I used to love Burger King when I was younger—it’s what my family would eat when we’d visit relatives in North Carolina.”

For Callahan and his family, fast food was a treat rather than an everyday food choice. He takes this moment to address the cost of fast food, acknowledging price as its major appeal. However, he’s not only referring to its monetary value.

“We’re paying for convenience with our lives and with the livelihood of small farmers,” Callahan says.

And it’s our demand for cheap food that is the most taxing on Americans, creating health problems like obesity in children and adults alike. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria in our food is on the rise with evidence pointing to vaccination practices common in factory farms. These “superbugs” are even pushing back against insecticides, continuing to feed on endless rows of monoculture crops that supply the majority of fast-food chains.

There’s a fundamental difference between choosing food that’s within reach of our own backyard and sourcing products from across the country or from overseas. Choosing the latter denies our nation’s soil of a rich biodiversity on a socioeconomic level. It sends a clear message: We’re not supporting our communities.

Callahan brings up food-dollars and the concept that what we purchase for subsequent consumption is akin to casting a vote for what gets shelved at our local supermarket. This power in purchasing extends beyond mere groceries, however.

“We concentrate vast wealth and power in the hands of the few whenever we choose to support supermarkets or fast-food chains instead of local agriculture,” Callahan explains. For the latter—the farmers—food is much more than a commodity; it’s a way of life.

**Food is More than Fuel**

We’ve been led to believe that our desires can be fulfilled by subscribing to overly industrialized and globalized markets. Both cater to our consumption habits. We’ve become accustomed to getting only what we want, whenever it is that we want it.

“We’ve forgotten how to take it easy,” Callahan says. “We’ve forgotten how to make do with what we’ve got.”

This is one of the most pressing issues in food and agriculture today. Case in point: seasonal produce is now available year-round at supermarkets, which has come to be expected from restaurants—and that’s simply not sustainable. Tomatoes, for example, are what Callahan uses to underscore this perspective. Lest we’ve forgotten, tomatoes used
to be only available in the summer months, from July to late September. Yet, the Platonic ideal that is the Sandwich almost always comes served with lettuce, onion, and tomato, despite these ingredients being out of season.

We’ve become increasingly complacent in our tastes. This is especially apparent in the South, where we know what we like and like what we know. The unfamiliar is often met with reproach, especially when it comes to trying new foods. True cuisine, however, is about inspired novelty blended into savory tradition; it’s about getting past what we’re used to in favor of new, sensory connections.

Callahan’s position as a chef affords him the ability to push these boundaries, to ferry individuals across imaginary borderlines of taste. It’s his responsibility to not only challenge people’s tastes but to also delight their palates. Though, as a business owner (and as a husband and father of two), it’s his prerogative to keep the customers coming—and that means appealing to the masses.

When asked what people could do to affect change in their daily lives, to make a difference on a larger scale, he responds without hesitation: “Just add knowledge,” he says. “When you know your farmer, you know your food.”
Local education non-profit UnifiEd leverages the power of creative tools and community involvement to inspire meaningful changes in Hamilton County’s public education school system.

In June 2014, UnifiEd, a Chattanooga-based education non-profit organization comprised of parents, teachers, and citizens, launched with the intention of empowering parents, teachers, and students with the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate the bureaucratic tape surrounding public education and bring about changes they long to see.

“We believe the more students, parents, teachers, and interested public that are involved in the decision-making processes in Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE), the better our education system will be,” said Executive Director Jonas Barriere, who took the helm in July 2016.

“Local government works best when local residents are empowered to advocate with that government,” Barriere continued. “UnifiEd was created specifically to empower stakeholders—parents, teachers, students, and involved community members—to do just that, and in the nearly three years we’ve been operating, I think we’ve accomplished that.”

UnifiEd is one of three education nonprofits in Chattanooga. However, unlike the other two organizations, the Public Education Foundation and Chattanooga 2.0, UnifiEd is not affiliated with the school system.

“We’ll work with the school system when it’s mutually beneficial, but we’re not a contracted partner on paper or in practice,” Barriere said. “This allows us a certain level of freedom to advocate for the community in a thoughtful but forceful way.”

CommUnity Collaboration

A key enterprise of UnifiEd is ensuring stakeholders stay up to date about what is happening in Hamilton County schools and are equipped with the necessary tools and resources to enter the bureaucratic arena and initiate the changes they seek, Barriere explains.

“We believe that community activism is critical to creating the best possible school system,” Barriere said. “Part of activism, of course, is education of the activists. Making sure they’re informed about what’s taking place is the first step in getting more people involved.”

To achieve this, UnifiEd brought on board a director of educator engagement, as well as a director of student engagement.

“They’re charged with the difficult work of ensuring students and teachers remain informed about what’s occurring in Hamilton County public schools and their voices
are included in the decision-making processes that occur in HCDE and in other government agencies who influence education,” Barriere said.

In 2016, for example, UnifiEd took steps to ensure the community’s voice was heard in the HCDE’s selection of the school system’s new superintendent. UnifiEd was able to rally 300 community members to actively engage their school board members on passing a policy to include the community in the hiring of the school system’s superintendent. UnifiEd’s advocacy led to the school board’s passage of resolutions that would give the community more influence on future superintendent hires.

“One resolution, in particular, will require the school board’s search firm to build a comprehensive community involvement plan, which they’re now currently drafting,” Barriere said. “And another, which is currently in the planning stages, makes way for a series of community forums involving all candidate finalists.”

While the school board works to finalize its community involvement plans, UnifiEd is keeping stride. In March 2017, UnifiEd held a series of 10 community conversations in each of the school system’s nine districts to gain insight into the community’s vision of a new superintendent. More than 100 community members attended the discussions and participated. Each meeting focused on the current needs of Hamilton County schools, qualities and experiences the community expects the new leader to hold, and ways in which the community can get involved in the recruitment and selection process of the new superintendent.

**Shaping Policy**

UnifiEd has also taken strategic measures to ensure students’ voices are heard. In 2015, for example, the organization’s Student Voice Team, a group focused on giving voice to Hamilton County students, conducted an informal survey to tease out what high school students cared most about and changes they wanted to take place.

“The survey’s results indicated that bullying and harassment were at the top of the list, and our team set out to work on these issues,” Barriere said.

In the midst of UnifiEd’s campaign to address bullying and harassment in Hamilton Co. schools, a gruesome assault took place at Ooltewah High School and made national headlines.
“Our organization was uniquely positioned to champion for this student-voiced cause,” Barriere said. “Because our team was already working on this issue, they were able to step in as experts—our team was able to quickly point out to HCDE and other interested parties that the school board was in compliance with state law. Furthermore, our team collaborated with HCDE’s attorney to devise and include legal language for a formal policy at HCDE regarding bullying and harassment, which was adopted by the school board as an official policy.”

The Student Voice Team is taking things up a notch in 2017.

“This year’s survey will be more formal, and the goal is to reach 65 percent of HCDE high school students to learn what their biggest issues are,” Barriere said. “The results aren’t yet tallied, but there are a lot of interesting ideas that are taking shape.”

Looking Ahead

Maintaining its momentum, UnifiEd has its sights set on creative projects this year that will aid stakeholders in making meaningful changes in their schools.

“We have lots of projects in the works that I’m excited about,” Barriere said. “Two larger projects, in particular, that we’ll be working on include fully implementing our PACT for Public Education and promoting a series of climate videos we are releasing as part of our Public School Guide.”

UnifiEd’s PACT for Public Education is a comprehensive plan for improving certain areas in the school system. The plan consists of four key pillars:

- Ensuring there is a great teacher in every classroom by investing in our educators and ensuring they’re equipped with the necessary resources
- Achieving universal excellence by extending equal opportunity to and creating a strong foundation for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status
- Building community support for public schools by increasing transparency and accountability
- Prioritizing funding for public schools by developing and implementing a strategic financial plan

“Our team will be running separate campaigns for each component of the PACT over the course of the next 18 months,” Barriere said. “Part of our campaigns will focus on recruiting community involvement.”

Barriere is also excited to see the results of the short climate videos—clips illustrating prevailing trends in Hamilton County public schools—that the organization began releasing in early April 2017.

“The videos only last two to three minutes but cover comprehensive data on every school in Hamilton County—from test scores to per-pupil spending to course offerings,” Barriere said. “Each video highlights the culture of learning at public schools in the nine districts.”

Students, parents, teachers, and community members now have access to extensive data on their schools that they can then use to connect with their respective school district’s board member and county commissioner and communicate changes they’re wanting to see in their schools.

Coming Together for a Common Cause

“UnifiEd can be viewed as a vehicle for change,” Barriere said. “Whether you’re an educator, parent, student, or involved community members, our doors are always open to ideas. We’re here to help anyone with a bold or brilliant idea for public education navigate the bureaucracy—which can be slow-moving or difficult to change—and initiate the change they seek.”

Though UnifiEd can help to facilitate change in the school system, the organization can’t go it alone.

“While we can provide the necessary tools and resources to help bring about meaningful changes that our community is wanting to see, unifying all stakeholders in Hamilton County around a shared vision for public education is essential, but isn’t easy—it requires hard work from a lot of people,” Barriere said. “If you’re interested in helping our organization and community achieve our mutual education goals, please join us.”
grackle
JULIE SUMNER

An oil-slick of a bird,
midnight sheen in flight,
a blackened rainbow
plodding through the weeds
at the road’s shoulder,
scavenging dead ants and stale fries—
you stop to stare at me,
take inventory with your
unapologetic amber eyes
and find me wanting
due to my own want.
You tilt your head at me,
pitying my blindness
to the feast right
in front of me
Drink it how you like it

Loyalty, like coffee, runs thick through our veins.
Fuel is an integral part of human life—we need gasoline to move our cars, methane to heat our homes, and coffee to catapult ourselves out of bed. Many businesses take advantage of this human need for fuel, and Chattanooga is no exception. In a town with so much growing business that is constantly attracting new professionals, it would be a mark of unintelligence not to capitalize on the particularly vast need there is for caffeine. Otherwise, we run the risk of turning into a city full of miserable, snarky zombies who are so angry about being out of bed, we may swallow someone whole. There’s all kinds of research about the benefits of caffeine. Research from Stanford University says it can help you live longer by preventing inflammation-related diseases; one researcher claims that caffeine can boost motivation and increase sports performance; and many others claim that coffee can make you smarter and more productive, boost your metabolism, and fight depression.

All around Chattanooga, there is certainly no lack of competition between various fuel stations simply because of their proximity to each other. They’re competing to sell the same product in the same area, so how do they make their businesses stand out? Gas stations do it by price. Coffee shops do it by, well, any number of things: products, quality, price, or atmosphere. There are at least twelve coffee shops around downtown Chattanooga, which creates so much competition you’d think there would be an all-out coffee war in Chattanooga, complete with pastry bombs and espresso-scented battle cries.

“My coffee is more robust!” one business would claim, spraying the ground with broken, locally made crockery. “My beans are more ethically sourced,” another would return, drenching their opponents in delicious seasonal drinks.

You get the picture.

However, the sense of competition between the many local specialty coffee shops in Chattanooga is far less dramatic. I talked to many baristas around town to get the scoop on the level of competition (a Coffee War, even), only to find that there isn’t much to speak of aside from “healthy” or “friendly” competition. Each business has its own unique contribution, whether it’s specialty coffee, espresso, or food. These differences make each coffee business stand out from the other one three doors down.

Take Stone Cup and Revelator Coffee Company, for example. Both on Frazier Avenue, they’re within walking distance from each other, but you’ll see a slightly different crowd enter each. This may be perplexing until you look at their menus. Revelator serves very simple coffee and espresso drinks along with a small selection of pastries. Stone Cup, on the other hand, has a full service kitchen as well as a multitude of coffees with flavor add-ins. Revelator serves people who really love coffee in its purest and simplest form, while Stone Cup caters to a slightly larger range of people just because they have more options. Revelator attracts people who come to study, relax, and just drink their coffee, while Stone Cup draws larger groups of families and people who want to stay longer to enjoy their food. Does that make either place superior to the other? Of course not. They just have different things that they offer to the community. Either way, you’re greeted at the door with a smile, and if you’re a regular, they’ll remember your name and your drink order.

“It’s pretty simple—we love our product, and we love to support the other people who make good coffee.”

Some regulars float around from place to place, and some baristas find their caffeine fix somewhere other than where they work, but there are no hard feelings and no battle lines drawn in the coffee community. It’s like an extended family for some people. During one of my many midday respites at Milk & Honey on Market Street, a young girl locked herself in the bathroom and refused to let her grandfather in. A manager knocked on the door to help.

“Hey, Hallie, it’s Sarah. You okay in there?”

The little girl unlocked the door and began to chatter away. Sarah turned the situation over to the grandfather and got a big hug when the pair of regulars left.

Coffee shops provide an escape for artists, students, and other hard-working people in the community. All you have to do is walk in the door and look around—no matter the location, people are there working on their laptops, chatting with friends, or reading a book. When I make plans to catch Catalpa 37
up with a friend, my first suggestion is to grab coffee, and I know I’m not alone. It’s the community-oriented aspect of these businesses that keeps them going and prevents a Coffee War. This is a sacred space, the Switzerland in the war of conflicts we face every day.

“There’s a certain type of crowd that hangs around coffee shops,” one of the friendly baristas at Stone Cup explained to me. He casually invited me into the kitchen to chat as he took orders, prepared drinks, and chatted with his regular customers. “It doesn’t really have anything to do with what they look like on the outside, it’s something in their brains—they’re free thinkers.” Almost as if to illustrate his point, an artist comes down the stairs with two large, brightly colored canvases.

“What’s cool about the coffee places around here is that they do so much more than just serve coffee,” Loretta at Velo’s North Shore location explains. “We’re rooted throughout the city in so many other ways.” For example, Velo serves coffee at multiple restaurants around Chattanooga like Community Pie and Mean Mug. They also organize and participate in events around town such as the Cold Brew Hustle, a competition where participants create and make cold brew concoctions (“boozelss” and “boozeful”). People can sample, watch, eat food, and win prizes in this effort to bring the community together. “That’s the only ‘coffee war’ I know of,” she adds with a laugh. “There’s really not a lot of competition. It’s pretty simple—we love our product, and we love to support the other people who make good coffee.”

The lack of competition is more true for some coffee shops than others. People can be very loyal to their chosen coffee spot, which makes it hard for new places to build their own following of regulars, like Plus Coffee in St. Elmo. “Most of the people we see from day-to-day are just people passing through St. Elmo,” Abby at Plus explains. “It’s harder for us to break into the coffee scene since we’re a little bit farther from downtown.” It’s a quiet spot, but this offers its own benefits. I nanny for a family that lives close by, and Plus Coffee offers a much needed escape when we’re too cooped up in the house—it’s quiet enough that the littles can run some energy off while I get a caffeine fix, and the baristas are very excellent sports to the chorus of “Help you? Help you?” from toddlers who are fascinated with what goes on behind the counter. They’re working on expanding their menu so that they can offer a wide variety of food choices to their customers—mainly in the form of pie (really, really good pie) and (soon) different kinds of toast. Despite their own struggles to break into the coffee world, they still make an effort to give back to the community. They offer training courses for people who want to learn about their process of making coffee, and they offer pop-up stores for special events. Their tips go directly to local causes and charities, such as Widow’s Harvest, a non-profit ministry that provides for widows through services like home repair and emotional support.

In a city that holds so many educational and career opportunities, it’s no wonder that the coffee industry has so many loyal followers. It is interesting, however, that the vast sea of local specialty coffee shops far outnumbers corporate places, such as Starbucks. There could be any number of explanations for that, but the main one is simple: People are used to the local places, some of which have been around for years before Starbucks came to Chattanooga. The city is committed to local businesses, as evidenced by its “Shop Local” campaign, which designates the Saturday after Black Friday as Small Business Saturday. The coffee shops in town cater to that community feeling, using milk from local Tennessee dairy farms, such as Cruze Farm, as well as their own coffee roasters or other ethically-sourced ones based in the South. There is a very strong sense of loyalty involved—people are loyal to the places that have always been here, to the places that they like, to the places that make an effort to serve local and ethically sourced products, to the places that provide for them a needed respite from a busy life. “We believe coffee is more than the sum of its elements. Coffee brings people together, and in its simplicity, enlivens our culture—drink it how you like it,” Plus Coffee has written on their webpage. Take a break. Spend time with the people you love. Support the things you believe in.

Drink it how you like it.
There is a lot of hate being preached in the name of love, but the Reverend Bob Leopold is putting the emphasis back where it belongs.

Most Friday nights, anywhere from twenty-five to fifty people meet at the Hart Gallery on Main Street to worship at Southside Abbey. Bob rents out this small gallery on Main Street that sells artwork created by Chattanooga’s homeless population. It is a small space characterized by exposed brick walls, concrete floors, and a lofted ceiling, giving it an industrial feel.

On a recent Friday evening, people from all walks of life are gathered—large families and singles, businessmen and blue-collar workers, immigrants and Chattanooga natives, college students and professors. There are lots of rambunctious children bouncing off the walls, which is problematic in an art gallery. Midway through the evening’s worship, a woman asks why there is a uniformed officer in attendance. She is new to Southside Abbey and doesn’t know that the policeman and his wife have been regulars for three years or that he sometimes doesn’t have time to change out of his uniform after his shift. She isn’t the first to ask this question.

It is unusual to see people from all walks of life sitting together as equals, sharing a meal. Yet in another sense, this gathering consists of a wide sampling of typical Chattanoogans—just not necessarily the Chattanoogans that Bob initially set out to serve.

Bob resigned in 2012 from St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, an historic church in downtown Chattanooga, to start Southside Abbey. The break from a well-established and very traditional church—St. Paul’s was established in 1853 and worships in a building constructed in 1881—was quite the leap of faith, even for a priest. Bob’s inspiration for drastically altering his career path grew out of his experiences in the days following the unexpected death of his close friend Phil Pollard. Pollard, an active musician and long-time resident of Knoxville, had recently moved to Richmond, Virginia, when he collapsed and died on his 44th birthday. An impromptu memorial was planned, and Bob, because of his vocation, was asked to organize it. A chartered bus full of Pollard’s friends came from Knoxville. In total, more than 700 people showed up.

Recognizing that these people came from diverse backgrounds and did not regularly attend church, Bob decided to make the service less traditional and more of a celebra-
tion of Pollard’s life. Bob remembers that, after the service, he heard from many of those in attendance that if church had been “like this, a celebration of life,” then they would not have stopped going. This experience inspired Bob to leave St. Paul’s and start a church for people “who had been injured by the church.”

The structure of Southside Abbey’s Friday night worship has, from the beginning, remained the same: There is a brief service, communion, a reading from scripture, dinner, and small group conversations. It is consciously modeled after Christ’s last supper.

Bob says that in the first year there were lots of families, “but we felt called to do more.” Friday nights “had always involved a free meal, and trust and relationships grew with the homeless community.” He knew there were other places to get a meal on Friday nights, places where no one preached to them, yet they chose to become regulars at Southside Abbey.

As the demographics of the parishioners evolved, some families “left due to concerns of safety.” Because of this, the second year was focused on “embracing whom the Holy Spirit brought to us, which was largely the poor.” The third year “has been the return of the disaffected churchgoers who are here because of the demographic we are, instead of sticking around in spite of it.”

This sense of inclusion was palpable on the Friday night service I recently attended. Most people seemed comfortable in a situation where, at first glance, everyone appeared out of place.

Bob had asked those in attendance about the different ways in which churches of various denominations had pushed them away, and I was surprised to see a group of largely disenfranchised citizens—the poor, homeless, immigrant, mentally ill, and addicts of Chattanooga—deliver sharp criticism of the Christian church at large for being hypocritical, homophobic, sexist, racist, and classist. It should have been a tense scene, but everyone was comfortable with the topic that Bob had introduced for the evening’s conversations. I was probably the most uncomfortable person in the room. My discomfort was just a result of how unfamiliar Southside Abbey can feel, even for people who grow up going to church.

In speaking with Bob about Southside Abbey’s evolution, he stressed a distinction between the “perceived needs” ver-
sus the “felt needs” of a community. The problem, he says, is that “as a culture we look at an area we think has a need,” but “don’t ask what they need, don’t listen.” Further complicating the task of discovering these “felt needs” in a community is the fact that mainstream culture has systematically silenced marginalized groups, and they no longer trust the people who claim to want to help them.

Bob explains the distinction he makes about helping the community with the old English proverb about giving a man a fish. Historically, church outreach was simply giving food to the poor, something that he says Eastern Orthodox churches still practice by giving everyone a loaf of bread at the end of the service. More recently, outreach has evolved into “teaching a person to fish” in the hopes that he will learn to provide for himself.

Bob sees a “danger” in these models in that they “presuppose a one-way exchange, that the church has the good to give away.” As an alternative, Bob proposes a model of community outreach based on “fishing together.”

Like a good priest, Bob has a story to illuminate his meaning:

Mark, a homeless man who regularly attends Friday night worship, showed up recently after having missed several Fridays in a row. His face was bruised and covered with partially healed cuts. Bob greeted him: “Mark, it’s so good to see you. What happened to you?” Mark related that he was just released from the hospital, that two guys stole what few possessions he had and then threw him off of a bridge. Bob asked Mark if he knew who the men were that robbed him, and Mark said that yes, he knew. The men were also regular attendees at Southside Abbey. Bob offered to help Mark pursue some kind of justice. However, Mark refused to name his assailants, knowing that Bob would ask them to leave. Mark felt that the two men should be allowed to stay because “they need Jesus’s love as much as I do.”

It was an explanation that caught Bob off guard by flipping the paradigm of priest as giver of spiritual insight on its head.

Southside Abbey’s Senior Warden Kim Smith echoes Bob’s sentiment: “We were feeding our neighbors, but really they were feeding us spiritually.” She goes on to say that the “exchange rate was unbalanced,” that she found herself receiving more spiritually than the cost of the food might suggest was possible.

Perhaps Southside Abbey has managed to strike a chord with the homeless because, in many ways, it doesn’t look or feel like church. Worship services take place in the Hart Gallery on East Main Street, a familiar venue for many in the homeless community. The Hart Gallery describes itself as a “not-for-profit organization with the mission of offering
homeless persons and other non-traditional artists an opportunity to create and sell their artwork for their benefit.”

Southside Abbey is consciously designed to avoid the sterile formality that many associate with churches. The evening meal, while modeled after Christ’s last supper with the apostles, helps to create a familial atmosphere. Bob uses simple plastic banquet tables arranged in a cross and folding chairs for seating. Food frequently comes from nearby eateries like Conga, a Latin American restaurant across the street, and is eaten as parishioners talk amongst themselves.

Rather than offering a lengthy sermon, the majority of the time is spent in small group conversations, which Bob listens to as he mingles with the congregation. Without knowing Bob, picking the priest out of a lineup might be difficult. On a recent Friday, he wore flip flops, cargo shorts, and a faded Vol’s t-shirt, and only put on a hand-knit stole as he called everyone to worship with an opening prayer.

It may seem odd to hold a church service in an art gallery, but there are perks to this arrangement. The reality is that buildings are the largest expense for many churches. Not knowing how many disaffected church-goers he might attract, Bob would have been hard pressed to predict his church’s needs for the near future. Bob is acutely aware of how underutilized church buildings typically are. Many sit idle for six days of the week. Renting space from the Hart Gallery presented the obvious benefit of sidestepping these issues while also contributing to the local economy and a business that helps the homeless. But the most significant upside to not being able to see Southside Abbey when driving through the Southside is that the lack of a tangible structure shifts the church’s focus from the place to the relationships, or what Kim Smith calls a shift from the “steeple towards the people.”

Consider the typical question—typical at least for a city in the Bible Belt: “Where do you go to church?” It is loaded with the weight of theological, political, and socioeconomic distinctions. “I am a (insert denomination) and go here, to this building, at this address.” The mind falls into the easy habit of equating that place, that building, with what church is. The absence of the tangible church building forces parishioners of Southside Abbey to consider a different set of answers to these questions and new questions that are peculiar to Southside Abbey. Where, for instance, is Southside Abbey the rest of the week?

I wasn’t terribly surprised when Bob told me that “the Latin and Greek words for ‘church,’ or the word that gets translated in the Bible as ‘church’ just means an assembly of people.” The place those people meet is, to some extent, irrelevant. As a result, people and the relationships between them are the foundation of Southside Abbey. It’s common to hear similar statements about churches or schools, but the only possible answer to the question, “What is Southside Abbey?”, if you stop and think about it, actually is the people.

Bob’s approach to building relationships with people in his community who are traditionally overlooked—the poor, the homeless, those suffering addictions, those suffering from mental illness—isn’t ground breaking. He listens. He stresses that Southside Abbey is not a “program.” Tucked deep in the website is the following statement:

“We are not here to help. We are here to destroy the structures of oppression that are contrary to the love of God, embodied in Jesus.”

Southside Abbey does not aim to be just another band-aid for our large social and spiritual problems. Do the Friday night meals, shoe-drives, tutoring programs, school computer labs, and other projects that Southside Abbey has funded help the community? Yes, but help isn’t enough. Southside Abbey wants to change society. Bob wants to change the way we treat each other.

Part of what makes Southside Abbey so special is that it has such an all-encompassing mission but no concrete plan. Bob has no distinct vision for what the next project will be because those ideas will come from listening to the community. Take, for instance, the 2014 Jubilee Fund, which, in a Times Free Press editorial, Bob credits to the “congregation” as a response to the crosses erected on I-75 north. The Jubilee was a plan to raise $700,000, the cost of putting up those three crosses, and then “give it away.”

Of course there were guidelines: the money was to be spent “Feeding the hungry. Welcoming the stranger. Giving drink to the thirsty. Clothing those in need. Caring for the sick. Loving your neighbor. Forgiving your enemies. Honoring widows. Healing the land.” These are broad categories, but the ideas that fit within them are easily distinguishable. Furthermore, the fund was envisioned as “seed money” for the specific programs that people felt were absent in their communities. It offered an outlet for unheard people to voice their needs.

The Jubilee Fund ended up raising around $38,000 from
111 donors, which was used to fund 24 grants in the community. The smallest grant was $108 for rent, while the largest was a $7,000 donation towards a Habitat for Humanity home. Most of the grants, though, were around a thousand dollars.

These relatively small amounts, however, disguise the significance of the Fund’s achievements:

- keeping a family’s electricity turned on in the winter
- helping an immigrant family pay off loans with predatory interest rates
- funding tuition for twenty children to attend summer camp
- paying for the repair of a volunteer’s car so he can keep driving people in his community to AA and NA meetings
- helping establish tutoring programs and computer labs for students at Battle Academy, a local elementary school

These are tiny amounts of money relative to the amount of good they accomplished in the community.

Getting people to express their needs can sometimes be a large hurdle, but Bob has managed to establish some rapport with his community. At least, that was my impression when I saw the willingness of those gathered to offer honest appraisals of their interactions with the church. Such openness represents a significant amount of trust in Bob and testifies to community members’ belief in Southside Abbey’s commitment to their needs. They know that, regardless of the criticisms they level at Bob’s profession and the institution he represents, they will always be welcome on Friday evenings.

When asked about the current focus of his church, Bob laughingly replied, “If you asked me four years ago who I would be spending time with and told me it would be with those experiencing homelessness and addiction, I wouldn’t have believed you.” Bob’s surprise at where his church has taken him parallels his approach to building relationships in his community. Rather than beginning with a plan, Bob’s strategy is to listen to the needs of others and follow where those voices lead him. When asked about the future of Southside Abbey, Bob defers to past experiences, saying that, “We’ll go where the Holy Spirit leads.” Piecing these statements together, it becomes clear that not only do the disenfranchised direct Southside Abbey, but their voices are the “Holy Spirit” that Bob listens to for guidance.

After all his talk of working to establish ties within his community, I asked Bob at the end of a conversation if I could make the generalization that Southside Abbey was in the relationship business. Bob disagreed and remarked, “Really, we are in the love business.” That makes sense. Love is the common thread in the guidelines for the Jubilee Fund. It is the reason to listen to the needs of others. Love is the foundation for trust and the relationships that are built upon that trust. Bob envisions a world that is built upon love of all humanity. It’s a simple idea.

“We are not here to help. We are here to destroy the structures of oppression that are contrary to the love of God, embodied in Jesus.”

These are tiny amounts of money relative to the amount of good they accomplished in the community.

Note: After this article was completed, Bob Leopold took a position as the Incumbent at St. Luke’s Anglican Church in Ottawa, Ontario. The editors felt that this compelling story still needed to be shared. Friday night services continue at the Hart Gallery at 6:11 pm.
I’m watching the ballgame when this kid shows up at my place. Stabbing the doorbell and pounding on the door. “Anybody home, anybody home?” I open up, about to shove this motherfucker into the dead creosote bushes by the porch, but before I can open my mouth—even while my fists are still clenched at my hips—he says, “Can I have a glass of water, man? I’m dying of thirst.”

Dying of thirst. This sack of shit skinny-bones with red rims around his eyes, purple needle tracks crawling up his arms, jeans that are at least four sizes too big.

“Water?” I say, “Looks like you need something more than water.”

“What have you got besides water?”

“How about a glass of get the fuck off my porch?” I say and slam the door, but before I’m even halfway back to the couch, he starts again, nearly knocking the damn door off its hinges. I fling the door open. Again.

“What’d I just say?” I say.

“Just a glass of water, man. Please.”

Something about his ‘please.’ When I look at him closer, he does look parched. His hair is stringy and there are bits of grass weaved into it. His cheeks are sucked in and the skin is like putty. He smells like a skunk crawled up his asshole and died. After all, it’s been up around one hundred five pretty much every day all summer. It’s Phoenix. The fucking desert. Still. I’m about to say something smart, some shitty condescending jab, but right then my phone rings. Without looking to see who it is, because I’m eye-balling this thirsty kid on the porch, I answer. “This is Morris.” I’m really drilling this kid with a look.

A voice from the other side of the world starts in about my state senator. What would my dream state senate candidate do for me?

“Leave me the fuck alone, that’s what,” I say and then hang up and shove the phone back in my pocket. The kid is eye-balling me now with these dry, doe eyes. “Telemarketer?”

“Yes,” I say.
“I fucking hate those guys.”
Wha...? He hates...? How often does this kid get calls from...?

“How’d they get your number?” he says.
“They aren’t supposed to have it.”
“That sucks.”
How does he...?
I say, “Don’t move.”
I shut the door and go into the kitchen by way of the living room. The Diamondbacks are up. They’ve notched a run I didn’t see. I grab a plastic cup from the cupboard and fill it up with water from the sink. I drop in a couple ice cubes, then head back to the porch.

“Here,” I say and I’m about to say something else too, “Drink up,” or “Make it quick,” but the kid snatches the cup from my hand and throws it back. He drinks with loud sucking sounds, huge swallows that make his Adam’s apple jump up and down. The water streams from the corners of his mouth down his scruffy cheeks, down the sides of his neck, down into his shirt. When he finishes, he draws his forearm across his mouth. He’s panting. Panting like a dog.

“Just one more? Please? I’m dying of thirst,” he says, and hands me the cup.

When I bring it back, with water sloshing over the brim, I say, “What’s your name?” Again he drinks down the whole thing. Then he says, “Fireball. But it’s really Tony. Anthony.”

“What’s ‘Fireball’?”
“A street name. That’s what they call me out here.” The kid gestures with his whole arm, a huge, sweeping motion at everything in the world behind him.

“Why Fireball?”
“I don’t know. I guess because I’m impulsive.”
“Not because of the booze?”
“The what?”
“Like the liquor. Fireball.”
“I don’t touch the stuff.”
“What do you touch?”

Now Fireball gives me a look.
“Smack,” he finally says, “That’s my problem.”
He goes on to tell me he used to be a student at ASU. Majored in communications. Played club soccer. Partied, found drugs, lost the dorm, dropped out, stole money, got high. Wound up at the homeless shelter over on 12th Avenue. Which, he says, is where he goes now when he doesn’t sleep in the park.

“But,” he says, and then pauses, “I’m tired of all that shit.”

“Well. That’s good.” I mumble the words. What an idiotic thing to say. What else do I say though? What else could I say?

Fireball hands me back the cup and I say, “One more?” and he thanks me but declines and turns to go.


“They serve a meal over on 11th Ave. I’ll probably just hit that up.”

“And then head to the park? Or the shelter?”
“Probably.” He says it over his shoulder. “Thanks.”
“Don’t forget you’re tired of all that shit.”

Fireball stops and turns. “Yeah, that’s right,” he says, “I am.”
“Don’t forget.”
“I won’t.”

As I watch him wander away, my phone rings again. This time it’s fucking Bill, Gina’s attorney. As if we haven’t talked enough already, as if that bitch hasn’t bled me to death already, as if fucking Bill and fucking Gina and her parents and every-fucking-body else on their side hasn’t “negotiated” me out of my fucking boxershorts already. I definitely do not answer and Bill will definitely leave a voicemail. “HelloMr.Morrishowareyou?” Always like that, all his plea-santries reduced to one fucking polysyllabic prelude to an ungreased broomstick up my ass.

I sit down on the porch steps. This is my first time “losing it all.” I think about the lizards and roaches that
live with me now instead of another human being. I think about the screeching little kids who run the streets in my new neighborhood. They’re out every day until hours after the sun goes down. I think about the feral dogs that slink around in the dusty streetlights after the kids fade into the shadows. Slathering, slobbering, half-starved Rottweilers and Dobermans that live on alley rats and garbage. And the gunfire. That’s a new one. CRACK, CRACK, CRACK. Every night. Sometimes in the distance, sometimes across the street. The other day they blew a guy’s head off in broad daylight. Down the street at the corner store, the clerk. He wouldn’t give them the money in the cash register so blam-o! And took the money anyway.

After the ballgame ends—the Diamondbacks lose in eleven—I hop in my car. The insurance is lapsed, but at least I keep a Club locked on the steering wheel. Who’d want to steal a shitty VW Golf? That in and of itself is probably the best theft deterrent. I tool around the city for awhile with the window down. The wind grates my fore-arm and whips around my face, a hot, constant splash of exhaust and sand, the burned-up smell of the city and the ancient, earthy smell of the desert.

I swing through Eriberto’s drive-thru for a breakfast burrito and a horchata and think again about how I could eat this for dinner every night for the rest of my life and nobody would give a shit, least of all me. Then I try to remind myself of the other perks of bachelorhood—late nights at the club, late nights at home Netflixing whatever the fuck I want, late night solo porn jerk off parties. Late nights, night after night, growing into a fat grumpy-ass old man. Most likely. And that’s what really worries me. Every time I try to envision some kind of new life, whatever it is now or whatever it could become, I can’t see much else besides my fucking fat-ass laid out on the couch. In need of a blowjob, a shave, and either a diet or liposuction.

So what do I do instead of heading home? I drive around to the parks—Encanto, University—not exactly keeping my eyes out for Fireball, but more like just curious about who or what might be in there after dark. Sleeping people plopped here and there under the palm trees? Homeless heroin soirées? Whole down-on-their-luck, under-the-radar civilizations? But I don’t see anybody, at least not from the driver’s seat. There are big signs every so often about park hours and sleeping in the park is against the law, City of Phoenix code number blahblahblah but I figure if you’re desperate enough for a place to lay your head, you may not necessarily care about the rules. I bet you get really good at finding spots the cops don’t know about.

Finally, my curiosity starts to feel like voyeurism. I’m shooting home down Van Buren, toward the dead shine of the city lights, when I see this mound on the side of the road around 13th Ave. So I circle around and drive past slowly. An apache-patterned mound of blankets for sure, with an upside down military style back pack next to it. I pull off and park, grab the flashlight from the glovebox, and step out onto the curb.

Even though I’m literally tip-toeing, the crunch of my footsteps in the sand and gravel sounds like the loudest noise that’s ever been produced by anybody or anything. In one hand, I’m carrying my flashlight and the sack from Eriberto’s with my burrito in it, and in the other hand the sweating cup of horchata. When I get to the mound of blankets, I hear the snoring of whoever it is underneath and I see the blankets rise and fall in a nice, even rhythm.
What the fuck could this guy be dreaming about? Mansions?

I reach over and shake what seems like the shoulder, but nothing happens so I shake again, harder, and whisper, “Hey, pal. You hungry?” Nothing. I shake the shoulder even harder until the whole blanket and whoever is underneath is undulating. Ha. Undulating. A ten dollar word in the presence of a ten cent life. But that’s what it is. This guy is rippling. I am rippling this guy. I’m turning his body whoever is under there starts to move. This heavy, slow motion that reminds me of melting plastic. He’s talking too, but I can’t make it out.

“Say what, buddy? Are you hungry? I brought you some food.”

I risk pulling the blanket back from where it seems like the head is, and I’m right. There’s his head. He’s old and flabby. In the fractured beam of my flashlight, I can see white whiskers sprouting in huge clumps all over his chubby jaw and throat. His skin is knobbed with black warts and the skin that’s not covered by the warts is creased, lined, red, and peeling. His eyes pop open wide, these bloodshot gray eyes with black pin-pricks for pupils.

“You want something to eat? I brought you a burrito.”

The man roars, not like a loud zoo lion roar, but this raggedy growl in the back of his throat, mottled by the thick snot and spit that must be coating his vocal cords. And then the smell hits me. Not an oops-I-forgot-my-Right-Guard smell that everybody has smelled like from time to time. But an I-shit-my-pants-two-days-ago-and-am-still-wearing-those-pants-now kind of smell. The most rancid scent that has ever been inside my lungs. I gag and stagger back, drop the bag and cup, and plunk down on my ass.

“Food, look. Food,” I say, and suck in air through my shirt. The poor bastard struggles out of his tangled blankets, pawing them off his body with these enormous, fleshy hands. Finally uncovered, he sits there dazed. Thirty seconds, maybe. A minute? His eyes go closed and he sticks his twisted nose in the air and sniffs. I guess what this tells him is, “Food! Food! Food is nearby!” because he rolls onto his hands and knees and crawls the couple of feet to where I dropped the Eriberto’s bag and the cup of horchata, which has spilled out onto the sand and gravel.

“Shit. Sorry,” I say, looking at the empty cup.

But the man doesn’t look at the cup. He tears open the bag, grabs the burrito, and tosses the bag away. Next, he tears off the foil the burrito is wrapped in, and tosses that in the same direction as the bag. Then he chomps into the burrito and rips the end off. Salsa squirts out of his teeth and cheeks in a quick little arc. He doesn’t stop biting and tearing until it’s gone, with its remnants—little pieces of egg and tortilla—caught up in his beard and spread down the front of his shirt in a scummy wash. Then, a huge belch that flaps his lips. I catch and hold my breath for as long as I can. Finally, he sits still again except for that nose, which he keeps in the air, sniffing and snuffling.

“Holy shit,” I whisper and stare at him, waiting for him to say something, “Thanks for the burrito,” or even acknowledge me in any kind of way, but he doesn’t move. A deaf-dumb circus bear, a stupid fucking animal.

“Well, okay, you’re welcome,” I say and stand up, “You have yourself a goodnight, sir. I hope things get better for you and all that. Good luck with everything. Maybe someday you’ll get the chance to wipe your ass or even take a
shower. We all can dream, right?”

I head back to my shitty Golf and drive straight back to my shitty roach and lizard infested place and pour myself a big drink of shitty whiskey.

I’m an asshole. It makes me sad that I have to disappear completely into a whiskey haze before I realize it. I’m a shitty asshole and I treat other people like shit and I only care about myself and before long I’m bawling.

When the sun comes up, I’m still on the couch. Welcome back to bachelorhood. My wallet and keys are still in my pockets, so I lock up, stumble out to my car, and putter over to this diner, Rancho de Oro, that’s right around the corner, that I’ve yet to visit since I became the neighborhood’s latest down and outer. But the waitress brings me coffee before I can even look at the menu. It’s bitter, but it’s hot and it helps.

I look around and the place is filled mostly with guys eating alone. The morning sun that blares in the huge windows highlights their every detail. A guy across the way in ripped up jeans and cowboy boots is reading the paper and sipping his coffee. His cowboy hat is cocked back on his head. Señor Nonchalance. Another guy is shoveling eggs and bacon in as quick as he can. He downs his OJ, and points to his glass. More. Now. He’s got things to do, places to be. Another guy in a shirt and tie is waiting for his check, flipping through his phone, fixing his collar. A plane, I bet, will be waiting for him at Sky Harbor. Business class.

He’s off to make deals with the world.

I sit for a bit after my Denver omelet is gone. I close my eyes, like a lizard on a slab of sandstone in that glorious morning sun. It strikes me that I should call fucking Bill back, and I decide I actually will, not right now, but I will. Later on today, before he fucking calls me again. Whatever the fuck you want Bill, whatever fucking Gina wants, I’ll do it. Let’s do it. Let’s get this all over with, once and for all. Let’s get started, let’s get finished, let’s get on with ourselves.

Rancho de Oro gets my stamp of approval and I decide to become a regular. I pay and tip big. On my way out the door, who’s coming in but Fireball, the kid from my porch yesterday. He looks like he hasn’t slept, eaten, or had any water in weeks.

“Fireball.” I stand in his way and he stumbles into me, looks up at me, gives me half a smile. There are fresh, damp scabs on his cheek and nose. Faint squiggles of dirt run across his hairline, down past his ears, down his jaw.

“It’s you,” he says. His breath reeks. The sweet-heavy smell of cheap, hardcore booze.

“You said you didn’t—” I start, but stop myself.

“I’m just getting something to eat, man. I think I have some money. I have some money right here.” He goes into the front pockets of his jeans and pulls out a bent cigarette.

“Well I thought I had some money. Somebody fucking robbed me, man. I’ve been fucking robbed.”
new year’s day

JULIE SUMNER

Surprise takes roost
in my consciousness
as I register the sound
of leaves in a summer storm—
but these are no leaves.

Barren limbs blossom
with feathers of birdish angels
wearing black bandit masks.

I recognize them
but I cannot remember
their name.

Sifting through memory’s borders,
I span every synapse
in search of their name,
spend seconds like water
combing for it through
the terrifying blankness.

Their name becomes
the lost coin, the lost sheep,
the entire kingdom
just out of reach.

Cedar waxwings—

It lights shyly
on the topmost branches
of my knowing,
just as the living flock
lifts and shivers,
then disappears
into the white sky.
WHO IS THE SOUTHERN WOMAN?

For my grandmother, Druette Towles.

If you need advice, Druette knows. If you need prayer, Druette prays. If you need someone you can count on to get the job done humbly, with a servant’s heart, it’s Druette.

Druette Killingsworth was born on December 30, 1931, to Cora and Coley in the rural community of Jack, Alabama. Like many girls born at this time in the Deep South, she was given no middle name. When she grew older, probably 17 or 18, she would marry and take her husband’s last name.

For Druette, that didn’t happen until age 24—years beyond the norm in the South at the time. She became Druette Killingsworth Towles after marrying Thomas Wendell Towles, another native south Alabamian. Finally, she could pursue her heart’s desire of Southern womanhood: to become a wife and mother.

Her husband, a carpenter, worked hard to fulfill what he felt was his God-given duty to provide for the family. Like many Southern women, Druette felt her God-given duties were to remain faithful to the church and support her husband and children. This meant cooking (amazingly well), sewing, gardening, home remedies, and general frugality. To make ends meet, this also meant working outside the home for several years at a local clothing factory.

Speaking of God-given duties, many Pentecostals in Druette’s time felt physical appearance was scripturally mandated to be modest, simple and humble—and that was for women only, in most minds. Women grew their hair long, typically wearing it in a bun. But with four kids and home and garden work to be done, Druette found her short hairstyle easier to manage and broke with the practice.

Call it Southern values or the trademark of the Traditionalist generation, Druette and Tom always sought to establish foundational principles for their family. Working hard, seeking the Lord, and helping others were the pillars of the Towles way. Perhaps it was this tenacity to conviction that earned Druette the respect she had in the community, in spite of not fitting the cultural mold.

Most parents say they want a better life for their children than they’ve had. Druette lived this, encouraging equally her daughters and sons to pursue college degrees, all while...
holding fast to the traditional upbringing she and Tom es-

Then there’s me, her granddaughter: twenty-five years old, no husband, cooking skills that barely stretch beyond a slow-cooker, almost no accent. I don’t like country music. My fair skin doesn’t enjoy being outdoors. My goals include a happy family, but also career progression and making a difference in my circle of influence. Many times, I feel like a speck of Blue in a sea of Red. And I sometimes feel a weight of disappointment around colleagues and strangers.

It sends me into a spiral of questions: Why do I relate less and less to the context I was born and raised in? What is different about me and my Southern peers that causes such philosophical and political differences? Is there a way to stay true to my southern roots while embracing the new convictions I’ve adopted?

Then, the real question appears front and center in my mind: What does it mean to be a woman in the South?

Here, female strength is often labeled, judged, and mostly hushed. My mother, for example, has been called angry and a “man-hater” for her confidence and unapologetic persistence. I can’t confirm my grandmother was called any names, but I’m sure her unconventional life choices earned a few eye rolls. Southern culture is often called slow to progress, and in many cases, I’ve observed that to be true. The South isn’t winning many popularity contests—with the world or with me. Yet, my roots are deep here.

Instead of a defeated sigh, I smile and hold my head high knowing my life has been built with Druette’s notion of Southern womanhood. The progression in my family from my grandmother to me was absolutely on purpose. Maybe it’s the Steel Magnolias that make up the framework everyone else holds on to.

My grandmother would’ve never described herself as a feminist. Doing the right thing no matter what wasn’t anything worth labeling; it was just the right thing to do.

Druette’s strength will always lead the women (and men) in my family to show the South our mantra, as well as the mantra of many other women in this region: Being a woman of the South means a strong heart for equality and respect. People can and will surprise you. It’s not something you can label, it’s just who we are. In Druette’s memory, my goal will be to continue to be surprised and to be a surprise for others around me—from the Southeast and beyond.

“The South isn’t winning many popularity contests, with the world or with me. Yet, my roots are deep here.”
Clayton Bodily pulled his station wagon to the side of the road. His wife leaned forward in the passenger seat, eyes wide. Four children pressed little face to the windows of the car. It was 1967. It was autumn. It was dark. The family was on their way home from a late Sunday service in Nashville, TN. What they saw that night would stay with them for the rest of their lives—a silver, bullet-shaped object rushing across the sky, flames trailing behind it. The craft was low-flying, heading closer. It had no wings and made almost no noise. Windows patterned the object’s slick, metallic sides. “I don’t remember us being afraid,” recalled Celina Kramer. She had been 12 at the time. “We had just never seen anything like it.” Her elder sister, perhaps from blinking and squinting and staring so hard, lost one of her new contacts. This resulted in a small-scale panic, everyone inside the car searching for the lens as the craft sped past and vanished. The Bodily family decided not to tell anyone about their experience, fearing scandal if the neighbors found out. Imagine their shock when in the morning they awoke to the word “UFO” printed on the front page of the paper. Sightings had come in not only from all over the state, but from all over the entire Southeast. Pilots had seen it. Air traffic control operators in Knoxville had seen it. The Federal Aviation Agency in Memphis cried meteor, but no one else seemed to agree. Only one thing is certain about the event—the Bodilys would never forget it. The newspaper clipping they saved holds a sacred place in the family scrapbook to this day. And just in case you were wondering, as the article in the Nashville Tennessean made certain to note, large-scale hallucinations were surely an impossibility. All the liquor stores that night had been closed.