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 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, kutuhlp, 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.

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University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
English Department
From the Editor

The personalities and perspectives catalogued in this issue are just as strong and various as the team that bound them together.

Our theme for this issue, the contemporary Southern woman, posed a unique challenge for our staff, as we learned from this round of submissions that there is no one image or idea that truly encompasses her identity.

Is she a mother? A poet or a rapper? An artist, hiker, or bellydancer? The notions of identity can be both powerful and prescriptive.

The women featured in issue three of Catalpa are simply the many roots that feed the larger tree of ideas that make up the contemporary Southern woman—and we’re glad Catalpa offers a space to examine them. Within these pages is only a brief snapshot, based on submissions and contributions, of what we hope might start a larger discussion that moves us past our stereotypes.

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When entering a correctional facility, you are first required to remove your shoes and pass a body scan. Bags must be see-through, and undergo a trip through an x-ray machine. This process is one Victoria Bryan has gone through countless times. Bryan’s not a repeat offender; she’s there to teach. Her day job is professor at a community college, where she can walk into her classroom without thinking about what she’s wearing or what pens to carry. In prison, skirts are prohibited, and pens can’t have inner spring mechanisms.

On campus at Cleveland State Community College, Dr. Bryan teaches literature and composition classes, but at Silverdale Detention Center, she works to bring education to inmates by way of reading discussion groups and creative writing courses. Bryan’s not working solo—she’s there on behalf of Turn the Page, an initiative run by Chattanooga-based nonprof-

it the Southern Literary Alliance. It is because of Bryan that Turn the Page, founded in 2015, exists.

The program’s website explains that, “In a system that concentrates on punishment rather than rehabilitation, educational programs such as this have been shown to help men and women as they reenter society.” Since its inception, it “has served hundreds of incarcerated men and women, offering respite from the day-to-day struggle of serving time and creating opportunities for growth and transformation through literacy.”

Bryan’s efforts have become increasingly focused on women since she began working with Turn the Page. Though fewer women than men are imprisoned, women are the fastest-growing demographic among the incarcerated, and programs like Turn the Page are working to address this trend. Federal research shows that incarcerated individuals who participate in educa-
tional programs during their detainment have a 29% lower recidivism rate than those who do not.

Prison education initiatives exist throughout the South. One leading example is the Appalachian Prison Book Project, a nonprofit founded in 2004 by English professor Katy Ryan. As of 2019, inmates in six states (West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Maryland) have received over 30,000 donated books through the mail. The most popular books requested by prisoners include dictionaries, almanacs, GED prep materials, how-to guides for trades, arts, and hobbies, and information about Wicca. Recipients of these donations send thank you letters, sharing their appreciation for books that serve as entertainment, education, and ultimately, an escape from the reality of imprisonment.

Giving inmates mental distance from their incarceration is one benefit of programs like these; Turn the Page has peers in other states. Across the border from Chattanooga, in Georgia, a similar nonprofit named Reforming Arts was founded in 2009 by Wende Ballew. The organization brings volunteers into Lee Arrendale State Prison in Northeast Georgia to teach creative writing and theater classes, for which students earn college credit. Reforming Arts has had a positive effect on both educational outcomes for its students and on recidivism. Reforming Arts' focus, like Bryan's, is on helping female prisoners.

Nearly all correctional facilities exist to serve men. Female inmates have different concerns, though, which often go unaddressed. These concerns are dominated by family obligations. Most women in prison are parents, according to Dr. Natalie Johnson, a criminal justice professor at Dalton State College. When mothers are jailed, families are broken up. This takes a toll on the children, who are separated from their mothers, and shuffled into unfamiliar environments, living with family members or foster families. It’s hard for the women, too. Johnson describes one inmate whose request during calls home was for an open phone line to be maintained while her children played, so she could listen to them and imagine that she was nearby.

Though Johnson is a criminal justice professor, she admits she doesn’t have a comprehensive understanding of the law. She says that for women with lower levels of educational attainment and socioeconomic class (characteristics of the incarcerated population), the legal system is confusing and overwhelming. Johnson acknowledges that even police officers don’t have it down, telling me that law enforcement officers carry a pocket book of codes while on duty.

Dryly, Johnson points out that the name we’ve given the system, corrections, isn’t quite accurate. Imprisonment’s three basic functions are punishment, public safety, and rehabilitation, and the last often seems to go unaddressed. If Johnson had a say, public safety and rehabilitation would be equally important, followed by punishment.

“Most prisoners don’t spend their lives in detention. They’re going to get out,” Johnson tells me. She thinks education for inmates is a great idea. Inmates have “nothing but time,” she says. Programs like Turn the Page give prisoners a way to fill it and work to contribute to their eventual way out.

Support for women adjusting to life once released is increasingly central to Bryan’s work. In recent years, she has begun to coordinate with reentry organizations Love’s Arm, which helps former sex workers and victims of trafficking, and The Next Door, a transitional housing facility for recovering addicts. Bryan explains why she chose to expand her efforts from incarcerated women to helping those transitioning out by saying, “Water finds a way,” meaning her efforts have followed the needs she’s seen.

While participants in her classes have benefitted, so has Bryan. Teaching in prison, she says, challenges her as a professor and as an individual. Being part of this work, explains Bryan, “changed who I am as a teacher—and as a person—in a big way.”

Amy Burger is an academic librarian and a graduate student pursuing a master’s degree in English with a concentration in rhetoric and professional writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She lives in Northwest Georgia with her husband Ross, several cats, and a dog named Lucy.
What’s your inspiration for what you do?
The emotional feelings I get only when dancing. And the enjoyment I see in my students when they get that same feeling also. It keeps me going. I have to keep sharing this art.

What’s the most rewarding thing about it?
Getting to see and be a part of the student’s journey. When the student is in the moment and nothing else matters except her and her emotions and the energy moving through her when she is owning herself in her hard work and discoveries. And in return she enjoys what she does and it allows her to feel and express herself more completely.

What’s your biggest challenge?
Getting through to our community what belly dance is and what it is not. It’s not just fun and games/play-time (although we do have a blast together) and it’s not stripping! It is work learning to connect with our own bodies and working together to accomplish goals. We truly build up physical, mental and emotional wellness.

What does it mean to be a Southern woman?
Just as any woman anywhere, I believe in being responsible for myself and my actions. Being attentive to the world around me but not getting lost in it. Remembering that it takes equal amount of good as well as the not so good things in life to keep us balanced.

Hometown: Dalton, GA
Occupation: Belly dance performer and teacher
Favorite Southern saying: “Britches” for shorts
Mutt is an unfortunately named 70-pound, dusty brown, blue-eyed dog. He struggles against me while searching for a way out of the tub, splashing soapy water onto my red shirt. If he understood this bath means he’s going to an adoption event, he’d be more cooperative.

I’d only been volunteering at the Humane Educational Society in Chattanooga, Tennessee, for a few weeks before helping bathe dogs for the first time in preparation for an adoption event. The other three women helping have been bathing dogs every second and third Saturday of the month for a couple of years. They work with an efficiency and confidence that I haven’t built up yet, but that’s one of the reasons I wanted to push my comfort zone and volunteer at an animal shelter like HES.

I became a volunteer for a few other, more common reasons: I wanted to give back to my community, be a part of a group that’s doing important work, and I have personal experience with abused and neglected dogs because both of my own dogs were adopted from rural shelters – so it was the natural fit.

The majority of people I pass in bright red volunteer shirts while walking through the kennels are women, which isn’t surprising in animal-related charity work. Some have trained to help with the cats that fill one wing of the building, while others are like me and strictly dog people. All interests and skill sets are welcome to fill the many areas of need the shelter faces.

A Southern Epidemic

Living in the South, all the volunteers have first-hand experience with the heartbreaking epidemic of mistreated and abandoned animals in our communities.
Overcrowded animal shelters and high euthanasia rates are a distinctly Southern tradition. In most Northern states, animal shelters have empty kennels and wait lists for families who want to adopt a rescued pup. Unfortunately, that’s not the case in the South.

Many counties have minimal or no restrictions on loose animals. In these rural communities, it’s common for dogs to roam freely and even more common that they’re unaltered. Families struggle or don’t see the need to pay for expensive surgeries for their pets, or owners want “just one” litter of puppies from their dog, but then she quickly becomes pregnant again afterwards. I’ve met men who refused to have their bud-

dy Brutus neutered because they didn’t want to emasculate him or make him “less of a man.” Even after they’ve been told about the risk involved with unwanted litters, aggression issues with other dogs and shorter lifespans in unaltered animals.

Unwanted puppies, abandonment, and other factors contribute to the overcrowding epidemic that shelters like HES are trying to fight. Each animal that comes through their doors are spayed or neutered before being adopted. HES offers low-cost vaccine clinics and microchipping so it’s easier to find lost pets. Like many shelters and rescue groups in the South, they’ve started transporting animals to organizations in the Northeast where overpopulation isn’t an issue and they’ll be more likely to be quickly adopted.

Jeanine Cloyd, volunteer manager at HES, has witnessed the issues animal shelters battle in the South for over a decade. She started as a volunteer herself before working at the shelter full-time in 2006 and eventually moving into a role that focuses on growing and supporting HES’s vital volunteer base.

She believes the nurturing personalities of the women making up 90 percent of the shelter’s volunteers likely play a large role in their reason for volunteering. But, she also points out that at almost any non-profit organization, women often make up a majority of the volunteer ranks.

“I’m always so blown away by the commitment this group of people has to the animals we shelter here,” Cloyd said. “They’ll go above and beyond with anything you ask of them. My job is to manage people who truly enjoy coming to ‘work,’ and it’s a really inspirational thing.”

More than 900 registered volunteers have gone through the organization’s orientation, but Cloyd estimates that only around 300 actively volunteer on a regular basis, with around 125 considered very active. It’s not uncommon for new volunteers to only visit a handful of times before dropping off, and Cloyd and I both agree that’s likely due to the nature of the work involved.

The Burnout Effect

Spending time in an animal shelter on a daily or weekly basis isn’t an easy task. The condition in which animals enter the shelter, both physically and emotionally, can be bitterly heartbreaking, and the shelters themselves can feel cold, clinical and uninviting.

That atmosphere is more pronounced at HES because it’s an old shelter. Over 100 years old, in fact. The staff and volunteers work diligently to ensure the animals’ kennels are clean, safe and comfortable, but anyone who walks through the doors is still hit by **the unavoidable smell and noise of hundreds of animals lining narrow halls** marked by chipped paint, uneven, hazardous floors, and water streaming into the dog kennel area when it rains.
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Dogs come in scarred, underweight or terrified of their new confining, concrete walls, with the overwhelming sound of dozens of dogs barking from boredom or frustration. For people, spending time here requires a blend of compassion, mental strength, and a level of emotional distance that can be hard to balance.

Rebecca Shearer has been volunteering at the shelter for several years. She says that the way she thinks and feels about the shelter has changed over the years, and sometimes even day to day, but it’s the fellow volunteers and staff that make the experience worthwhile.

“I love it, or I hate it, and then I have that guilty feeling of ‘wouldn’t my life be so much easier if I didn’t volunteer’? Yet, I stay,” Shearer said. “What I love about being a part of the volunteer community here is being surrounded by a wildly diverse group of folks who all share one important sliver of their genetic makeup, which is caring so much about these animals. Volunteering has really altered the way I deal with my emotions and handle life stressors. I’m forced to turn disappointment into something positive or it’ll eat away at me. I couldn’t save one, so I’ll try to save the next three.”

**Getting Our Hours In**

Dogs kept in 4x8 concrete blocked kennels have a lot of energy to burn when you slip on a leash and hurry them through a hall of barking dogs lunging excitedly at their kennel doors. It’s hard to blame them for the commotion and enthusiasm they have while pushing against the glass, because they all know the dog pulling me towards the door is getting a short jailbreak.

Volunteer activities include cleaning kennels and litter boxes, helping visitors find their way through the maze of cages and kennels, taking dogs to adoption events, helping with laundry, and folding newspapers for cat cages. I’m more drawn to dog walking, enjoying the combination of helping the dogs get time outside of the shelter while getting some exercise myself.

But even amidst the aging building, unmistakable shelter smell and never-ending stream of animals in need, I still find that spending time there just feels right.

“I think it’s fun and relaxing,” volunteer Susan Izell said. “Yes, cleaning a litter box and bathing a nasty kitten is a fun way for me to take time for myself away from the stresses of a job and other responsibilities in life. The cats and the staff are grateful for all that is done, and because of that, the longer I am there, the more I wish I had time to do.”

Some volunteers visit the shelter several times a week and form a personal bond with the animals. With daily adoptions and dozens of dogs earning their freedom ride North, I rarely get to know many before they find a new home. However, there are always sweet and deserving dogs who are overlooked because they don’t “present well” in the shelter environment – coming off as aggressive, overly hyper or fearful. But, given the chance to relax in a home, away from the stress of shelter life, many negative behaviors dissipate.

**Counting on the Future**

The collective goal is to find more homes for animals while fighting the culture that has left them in hopeless situations. Mary Bowman is another volunteer who has experienced the ups and downs of volunteering in a sometimes stressful and emotional environment.

“I invite anyone to show up when vans loaded with dogs and cats from hoarding situations, puppy mills, or hurricane affected areas arrive,” Bowman said. “Experience the hushed sacredness as teary-eyed staff and our red-shirted army stand shoulder to shoulder, tenderly shuttling scared and confused furry refugees off the vans, swaddling them in towels and blankets, taking them for walks and maybe baths, before loving-
ly introducing them to their crates and meals, cleaning up poop and pee, changing out newspapers, then taking them for another walk before finally bedding them down for the night. After all of that, what could be better than experiencing together the nurturing of an animal and seeing that beloved dog or cat heading home with people who have fallen in love with them?”

HES recently received funding to start construction on a new location. Everyone is excited about the future of the shelter, and not just because of the shiny new kennels and prospect of a non-leaky roof. A new shelter means more space for needy animals, more outdoor, fenced runs to get them out of their enclosures, and more adopters who won’t change their minds when they get overwhelmed by the rundown condition of the old building.

“The new facility is going to feel like a dream, but the shelter is much more than the physical structure,” Izell said. “It is the staff and volunteers who are passionate in their care for any animal who comes through the doors.”

However, volunteering is hard. Really hard. Some Saturdays, I come home from the shelter and am physically and mentally drained. It’s usually because I met a dog new to the shelter or one who’s been there for months that I hadn’t spent time with yet. There’s something about the way they look at me with that incomparable dog-like love and trust, even after being abused or abandoned or let down by people over and over again – and it hurts.

But then the next week, I help a family look at dog after dog until we take the right one to a play yard and it just clicks. Watching a couple turn to their son and ask, “Do you want to take this dog home?” Seeing that dog go from a kennel to the back seat of a car towards a new life makes the hard days worth it.

Everyone who volunteers has those stories about the dogs who have impacted them, and having a community that understands the up and downs but comes back anyway is motivating and empowering. It’s what helps everyone keep going.

“Kennel life is stressful, often heartbreaking, and passion runs high at HES,” Bowman said. “However, we always work through the tough stuff. Our deep sense of mutual purpose, high warmth for the animals and each other, and high fun keep us coming back day after day, event after event, adoption after adoption. That’s what family does – shows up!”

Laura C. Smith lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee where she works in communications and is pursuing a master’s degree at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her work has previously appeared in WhiskeyPaper and The Bangalore Review.
In her studio at Warehouse Row, I watch as local artist Ashley Folkner’s paint-stained hands work tirelessly on hundreds of individually crafted paper leaves for an upcoming installation. She is mechanically folding the hand-painted paper into greeneries and wrapping the wire stems with tape. We are surrounded by paint cans, art supplies, and power tools. The windowless room smells of hot glue and sawdust. Rap music plays quietly in the background.

Nestled between mountain ranges and the Tennessee River, Chattanooga is a place of heightened imagination for nature-loving artists. The magic and mysticism of the mountains is exactly what stimulates her artwork. “The Southern landscapes and color palettes have always inspired me,” Folkner says.

Her handmade and intricate displays are a spotlight for local shoppers at Anthropologie, where she works as a display coordinator. In addition to her full-time job, she also works as a freelance artist and designer, specializing in events, homes, and businesses.

Oftentimes customers request to purchase the used displays for weddings, events, and home décor. Folkner explains that her favorite part of her job is overhearing people who are dazzled by her work.

“I especially love when kids get excited and feel like they’ve seen something really cool,” she says. “I want people to experience happiness and whimsical things that can take them out of thinking about life, and Trump, and standard kind of shit. So, they can just for five seconds forget about regular life by looking at my installations…that’s enough for me.”

Folkner is one of those people who can walk into any room in the city and immediately recognize and hug at least two people. The same captivating warmth radiates from her artwork. She has the hospitality and charm of a true Southern woman, combined with her progressive views.

“I definitely sound Southern,” she explains to me as she works diligently on the paper leaves, noting that she identifies as “a woman of the world, not just the South.”
Her welcoming personality and selfless heart for others is where she exposes her characteristics as a Southern woman. She feels that she has a calling to stay in her hometown to create art for people and wants to influence people’s understanding of what art can be.

“Experimental design and art isn’t as popular in Chattanooga,” she says. “That is why I have to stay, to show people what progressive art is.”

Folkner explains that she has always received endless love and support from her family and attributes her success to them. But she laughs as she tells me that her family would comment on her art saying, “That’s beautiful! What is it?” She admits that she often felt misunderstood growing up, and people did not understand why she did not want a “normal” job. Working as an artist is more than just Folkner’s passion. She explains to me that she feels compelled internally to create things, “I have to. I feel crazy if I don’t.” She compares her drive to create to that of a runner. “Like a runner has to run, I’ve got to be a piddler.”

Folkner credits the strong women of her family for her values and work ethic. “I’ve seen the Southern women before me who didn’t get the opportunity to live out their dreams for themselves, that inspired me to do it for myself.” She was heavily influenced by her aunt who traveled the world as a Reiki master, healing people with her touch and energy. “She brought an element of spiritual nature to my work by exposing me to very different things as a child.”

Her natural creative aesthetic is organic and abstract. Her skills are diverse and spread across various mediums, she has even illustrated a children’s book and done interior design for restaurants. She uses many materials for her art and she loves incorporating antique furniture and décor into her designs, which brings an element of history and storytelling to her work. She also has the ability to work with everyday items in the creation of her displays; with straws, tree branches, and glue sticks she has creating detailed installations for Anthropologie. Most recently she has been on a balloon installation kick, creating grand displays for businesses and parties throughout the city with sculptures of colorful balloons.

The love Folkner has for Chattanooga is evident as she speaks with a sense of nostalgia of her mountain hometown. Her Southern spirit and captivating style is a glimpse of her brain transferred to canvas, paper leaves, and magical installations. The unique whimsy that her work expresses is knotted with her Southern upbringing as she feels an urge to share her abstract imagination with others.

Emily Livengood Branch is a graduate student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga pursuing a master’s degree in English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Professional Writing. She works in the financial industry and lives in north Chattanooga with her husband, dog, and cat.
S

ybil Baker, a writer and professor of creative writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and Brynija Loyd, an incoming freshman at UTC and aspiring writer, have an interesting relationship. Although Sybil is Brynija’s mentor, their connection is special and Catalpa’s Tiffany Herron visited them in Sybil’s office to learn more.

TIFFANY HERRON: I hope I’m not interrupting anything.
SYBIL BAKER: No, no. We were just shootin’ the shit, as they say.
BRYNIJA LOYD: What? {Laughing}
SYBIL: You’ve never heard of that?
BRYNIJA: No. Never. {Still laughing}
SYBIL: It’s like sitting around talking about nothing in particular.
BRYNIJA: Oh, like ‘spilling the tea’?
SYBIL: It’s more like talking about the weather. Isn’t ‘spilling the tea’ more like gossip?
BRYNIJA: Everything is gossip. I’m gonna use it. ‘Shooting the shit,’ I like it. {Laughter}
TIFFANY: Sybil, what interested you in becoming a mentor?

SYBIL: When I returned from sabbatical in Cyprus I wanted to contribute more to the community. After writing the book Immigration Essays I started thinking about ways to give back and decided becoming a mentor was something I could do. [I was] feeling like I needed to connect more with Chattanooga. I had tenure, I volunteered with the Bridge Refugee organization.

TIFFANY: Was there a certain program you chose?
SYBIL: No, I emailed the Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy about their mentorship program. I mentioned my profession and asked if there were any girls who were interested in writing. I underwent a background check, and was invited to the school to meet my mentee.

TIFFANY: Brynija, how did you learn about the mentorship?
BRYNIJA: A person from the school’s office came and got me out of class. I thought I was in trouble. {Laughing} I came down and there was Sybil.
SYBIL: I asked her if she would like to have a writing mentor. BIG smile, and we hugged right away. We just connected from the beginning. I met her mom, she is really involved and super supportive. I wanted to provide opportunities but I didn’t want to overstep. But she [my mom] was like ‘yeah, whatever.’

TIFFANY: How do you remember that first meeting, Brynija?
BRYNIJA: I thought, why are they doing this to me? I was scared. When I actually met Sybil in person I thought, ‘Who is this random white woman in my face?’ {Smiling} It was back when I didn’t know anyone who thought writing was as important as it was to me.

TIFFANY: How did you feel when you learned Sybil was an author?
BRYNIJA: I thought, why are they doing this to me? I was scared. When I actually met Sybil in person I thought, ‘Who is this random white woman in my face?’ {Smiling} It was back when I didn’t know anyone who thought writing was as important as it was to me.

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TIFFANY: How long have you known each other?
BRYNIJA: Um, well I was 14.
SYBIL: Yeah, so that was, what, four years ago?
TIFFANY: What were your impressions of Brynija were as you got to know each other better?
SYBIL: What’s not to love? Watching her grow up, she is very mature in a lot of ways. She is saving money for school and has a lot going on. Luckily she does have a supportive mom. She [Brynija] is learning to navigate the world and is independent so it is not surprising she has a strong work ethic. She has been accepted to UTC for Fall 2019, graduated high school a semester early and is now working close to full time. I am impressed by the way she has always been open for everything, to new experiences. I will like to continue [helping provide] that.

TIFFANY: Brynija, what genre do you prefer?
BRYNIJA: I’ve written songs and poetry. I’d like to write more short stories but endings are hard. I think poems and their endings are indefinite. I like writing those [poems and songs] more.

TIFFANY: Sybil, I know you write mostly fiction but Immigration Essays were more Creative Nonfiction. Are you from Chattanooga?
SYBIL: No, I grew up in Fairfax, Virginia, but my parents’ roots are from North Carolina and Arkansas. We eat grits, turnip greens, buckwheat pancakes and drink iced tea. [I relate to] the culture in that sense. It is ‘Southern light,’ not hard core South.

TIFFANY: Brynija, do you think being born and raised in the South, in Chattanooga, affects your writing?
BRYNIJA: Yes, deeply, because I am a black woman in the South. All the history [of being black] has been indoctrinated in you. The way I talk now is not Southern. People say ‘Oh you grew up in the North’ but I didn’t. I watched a lot of TV and learned from soap operas how to speak with a green voice, without an accent.

TIFFANY: Sybil, how do you see your role as a contemporary Southern woman?
SYBIL: White Southern people, we don’t interrogate our own whiteness. It’s a project but we don’t do it or even consider how, historically, we’re here because of slavery. I am trying to read more books by [African American authors], fiction and nonfiction. It [racism] seems more obvious in the South but there is racism everywhere. Living abroad I consciously realized ‘oh, I’m a white person.’ I was the racial minority.

TIFFANY: Brynija, where do would you dream of living if you could choose anywhere?
BRYNIJA: I have lived everywhere in Chattanooga, from one side of town to the other. But even if it’s Nashville, I want to go somewhere there is snow. Of course everyone dreams of New York, but just somewhere I could meet new people. Michigan might be nice. Someplace where there are all of the seasons.

SYBIL: I have to meet with a student, but go on without me.

TIFFANY: Brynija, what comes to mind when I say ‘contemporary Southern woman?’
BRYNIJA: I think of someone who goes to church, has a resting bitch face, a huge fuck-off vibe, and at the same time, a woman who says, educate me about something. She’s strong but also says ‘bless your heart.’ Sometimes I think that catch phrase [bless your heart] alone describes the South. Contemporary Southern woman is liberation and education. Am I that? Is that me? I am a version, a spectrum of all these things. I went to a predominantly white elementary school. In my head, everybody is black, easy no bias. In elementary and high school I hung out with racially ambiguous kids. I didn’t really think of stereotypes or wonder if people were racist. But then I got the nickname ‘Oreo.’

TIFFANY: No, really?

BRYNIJA: {Laughing} Yes, really, Oreo, and I didn’t understand it. When I got older, my mom had to give me a whole lecture about being black. There are people I know who are black, who told me what they thought I should know about being black specifically. With this new education I saw the world a little differently. When I met Sybil, I even thought maybe she’s compensating for white guilt. But then she did things she didn’t have to, and she continued to do things she didn’t have to do. That was how I knew she was sincere. Yeah, I see people look at us funny when we are out in public but I don’t care. She is more than a mentor. I was even apprehensive to talk to you. I mentioned to my friend how I felt when I got your email about the interview. I thought maybe you were going to Sandra Bullock blind side me. {Laughing}

TIFFANY: {Laughing} What? You mean from the movie? You thought I was going to blind side you? Oh no.

BRYNIJA: {Laughing} Oh yes, Sandra Bullock from The Blind Side.

TIFFANY: You know I’m not white right? {Laughing}

BRYNIJA: {Laughing} I also talked to my mom and she said I better do the interview. And then I also thought Sybil wouldn’t let anything like that happen to me. That’s why I decided to do it.
The next day I receive an email from Sybil:
I didn’t mention the most important thing about knowing Brynija—It has been so fulfilling to meet such a natural and hardworking talent and to watch her writing continue to grow and develop. Even better is that she is such a thoughtful, wise, and loving person. I can’t wait to say ‘I knew her when.’

Tiffany Herron is an emerging writer and graduate student in creative writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Withstand
BRYNIJA LOYD

When she speaks
The world turns
With its head tilted
Leaning in closer to hear her words of deep fried wisdom
It seems to seek refuge in her story

Listens to tales of her hands that used to fold linens
And cradle promises to her chest
That now take dreams and silk-presses them into reality

Her lips twitch as a sliver spun tongue sits heavy in a mouth made for everything but silence
She curses after church stomping on the gravel stone driveway of her past mistakes
Taking time to thank God for His blessings

Gaping in drawn out aw as her hips swing
Vibing to the rhythm of her high cotton lifestyle
While wearing the rough robes of her great grandma
Her feet glide

She lives and breathes without hesitation or regret
Yanking the weight of the world off her coffee drawn skin
She grinds
She shakes
Shimmies, and spins
Moving so eyes never leave her
She draws in everything surrounding her
**What’s your inspiration for what you do?**
My inspiration is just day-to-day life. I try to take a lot of experiences or emotions that I’m feeling. I listen to a lot of different artists to get insight as far as what types of tones, chords, or beats that they use. I try to incorporate that into my own unique sound...but just daily life. The struggles of being almost thirty and just grinding it out while still trying to honor my passions and chase my dreams.

**What’s the most rewarding thing about it?**
It’s two-fold. For myself, it’s an outlet, a stress reliever. Something to help me make sense of my emotions. On the flip side, it’s the energy I get from people when I am performing live. The coolest thing is when it’s completely silent, and you know people are really listening.

**What’s your biggest challenge?**
It’s hard to get your sound and music outside of the community. I wish there were more resources for networking opportunities as an artist. I’ve been local for six or seven years now. Also, just to get people to respect what you’re doing and not think that this is just a hobby. I’m doing this for real. I want people to respect that in order to be properly compensated.

**What does it mean to be a Southern woman?**
That’s a loaded question. It’s a huge part of my past and my current identity. There is a societal pressure to adhere to the norms, especially in the South where there is more pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. If you have any form of internal conflict with that...that’s been a spark for what instigated my musical career. Women are always “fighting against the patriarchy” or trying to find our own identity without it being attached to patriarchal values. Being able to stand alone and have our own identity. Like a “emecee” is the perfect example. I am a female rapper, why can’t I just be an “emecee”? It’s a loaded term in the context of everything that’s going on with new-wave feminism. But, I think there is strength and power in being a southern woman. It’s a weird juxtaposition.

**Hometown:** Chattanooga, TN

**Occupation:** Sales and marketing representative, poet, and Hip-hop artist
Street Art

ARTWORK | SEVEN
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Starting in the heart of Chattanooga, Tennessee on MLK Boulevard and reaching to Glass Street, the movement of color and expression can be seen adorning the walls of buildings. The murals depict a wide range of creative style, content, and vision, which is representative of Chattanooga’s artists, residents and visitors. Like jewels, these impressive pieces are meant to be shown off.
What’s your inspiration for what you do?
I was a drama club nerd, so I’ve always loved performing, costuming, and doing stage makeup. I started going to conventions in high school, already a big fan of animes and fandoms like Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings at that age. Originally I went to conventions to meet actors, and I would just wear t-shirts that were fandom related, but then I saw all these people in incredible costumes and thought: “I want to do that!” It’s just so much fun to get into character and do the makeup, having my theatre background.

What’s the most rewarding thing about it?
I love it when people at conventions run up to me and ask for a picture. It’s nice to see that someone else likes the character too and that they think I’ve done the character justice. I meet all sorts of people and I’ve made so many friends from going to conventions. You start to see a lot of the same people at these conventions in the South, but it takes a while to recognize where you know them from because they constantly change their appearance for their cosplays. I’ve made a lot of long lasting friendships, met some amazing photographers, and had great networking experiences.

What’s your biggest challenge?
Cosplay does not equal consent. Sometimes people want to run up and hug me when I’m dressed as their favorite character, but I’m not a very touchy feely person. I’ve even had people start fixing parts of my costume before, when they didn’t ask me first. Cosplayers are people, not the character they are dressing up as. I’m a normal person like the fans who really like the character. There are also members of the cosplay community who would rather tear other cosplayers down for things like their weight or gender. For me, cosplay is for everyone, it doesn’t matter what your gender is, what your weight is, or what your ethnicity is—if you like a character you should go out and cosplay that character. In any field there exists the type of person who feels they are the elite standard, and if you’re not up on their tier, you’re not a real member of the community. I don’t care if you go to Goodwill to piece together a costume, everyone starts somewhere.

What does it mean to be a Southern woman?
From a cosplay perspective, I think being a woman in general has changed a lot in my lifetime. I live in the Bible belt, and I was raised wearing dresses and Sunday vests for church. When I first started cosplaying, I always picked the dressy characters—ball gowns, princess, stuff like that—but then I started transitioning over the past few years into the strong female characters, like Supergirl or Riza Hawkeye from Fullmetal Alchemist. I even started doing characters that younger me would never have imagined, such as male characters. I one hundred percent identify as a female and was raised as a girly-girl, but just having the freedom now to be able to cosplay characters outside of my gender, to experiment with the makeup and costumes, and to not be limited to certain types of characters is so much fun.

JKat
Hometown: Clarksville, TN
Occupation: Cosplayer
Favorite Southern saying: “Not my circus, not my monkeys.”
The South can be envisioned as a flipping coin. The sides are vying to come out on top, and the tension between the opposing sides embodies the South’s search for its identity. As the South marches away from what it once was, it is figuring out what it can be. While these two sides are turning, my mother occupies the edge of this coin, living where the heads and tails of being a Southern woman meet.

She’s heard it a thousand times.
Why didn’t you go back to work?

My mother has given me many stories about her life and who she is, and if there is anything that I know about my mother, it’s that she loves to work hard. She finds no greater joy than accomplishing a task that she deems valuable.

Before my birth, she worked in an ophthalmologist’s office. Her boss was a tough woman who didn’t believe in excuses.

“That woman had no sympathy for me,” my mother told me. “The doctor fired me. She had just been pregnant a year earlier, but she fired me because I had
to step away from my desk on account of the morning sickness.”

My mother and I still debate whether losing her job was my fault, and I’m still holding onto the hope that one day I’ll win that argument. Losing that job dramatically changed the direction of my mother’s life.

“The plan was for me to take my maternity leave and come back. You were going to stay with your mamaw or nanny while I worked,” she said. Even though I never stayed with them like she’d planned, I saw both of my grandmothers often. But it was usually from my mother’s arms.

After losing her job, my mother and father had a long conversation concerning what would happen. They were not wealthy.

“We were just kids, and we weren’t sure your dad’s income would be enough with you on the way,” she told me.

After many late-night discussions concerning the future of her budding family, my mother decided to become a stay-at-home mom. While the particulars of these meetings are beyond my mother’s memory, she explained to me that, “At no point was I forced into being a stay-at-home mom. If your father was able and willing to take on the extra work, I would be willing to stay at home.”

Questioning this decision to be a stay-at-home mom is something that caused my mother to become defensive, and I can hardly blame her. She has many stories about women who have looked down their noses at her “domesticity.” While my mother may be willing to point fingers, I’ve never been quite as bold as she is, so for the sake of those who have earned her anger, I must show pity and exclude their names from the record.

“Those women never said it to me plainly,” she said. “It’s always these digs here and there, asking me, ‘Why didn’t you go back to work?’ or ‘Why didn’t you get an education?’ Basically asking me why on earth I’d ever want to stay at home and raise my children myself.”

My mother came to view these questions as an assault on her liberty as a woman. Why didn’t she take up the old torch she once carried? Well, it seems she found a new vocation that was family and tradition.

She explains it better than I ever could, saying, “I can’t think of any higher honor than to know that you brought up the next generation, that you played a part in forming someone, helping them become who they will be one day.”

Why was this her duty?

“Why didn’t she take up the old torch she once carried? Well, it seems she found a new vocation that was family and tradition.

“You were my baby,” she explained “You came from me, and I couldn’t imagine that anyone else was better equipped to form your mind and help you grow. Being a stay-at-home mom was the hardest job I had ever done in my entire life, but that being said, nothing has ever been so rewarding.”

The short-sighted question that immediately pops into the mind of a man who’s never mothered anything is, What’s so hard about being a stay-at-home mom? I’ve asked this question once before, and if looks could kill, I’m afraid that I’d be a dead man.

I suppose I can be comforted by the fact that I am far from the first person to ask that question, and I feel sorry for those hapless souls who will ask the very same thing.

As I said at the start, my mother is a hard worker. She has put everything she has into being a stay-at-home mom. Her home is her castle, her pride. She took charge of the house and its inhabitants. Today, my mother’s household stands as a shining beacon of her success.

Alex Francisco is a lifelong resident of Sale Creek, Tennessee. After being the first member of his family to receive a bachelor’s degree, he began his current endeavor of working towards a master’s degree in rhetoric and professional writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.
The South is a place where people use food to tell stories.

Culinary stories that are as complex as the South itself, forever leashed to a dark yet fascinating history, entangled in and imbued by a miasma of barbarity and benevolence, order and chaos, freedom and captivity, sweet and spicy, and God-fearing and hell-raising.

It's a place where disputes over how chicken is fried, barbeque is prepared, or whether sugar is used to sweeten cornbread operate as culinary shibboleths. Yes, the South is a dysfunctional family, but we are still family.

Southern Legacy Equals Pie

AUSTIN ANTHONY

The following is an excerpt from a handwritten recipe card:

**Pie Crust**

- 1 1/2 cups flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup shortening
- 1/4 cup lard
- 1/4 cup+ 2 tablespoons cold water

Mix dry ingredients and add cold water. Mix until dough forms a ball. Roll and bake in a pie pan at 350°F.
We are the inheritors of a story with countless sins that bear the fruit of a hopeful future.

In the South, food not only tells you where you are and who you are, it also tells you where you’ve been.

For my mother, her culinary story began in the year 1977, after moving from the big, bustling city of Dallas, Texas to a small farm outside of Martin, Tennessee.

Here is where my mother learned the language of food: how to know when the pie filling is the right thickness, how to know when you’ve kneaded the dough enough (but not too much!), and how to know, by smell alone, that the pie has reached perfection.

However, this process was done without the modern luxuries that we know and love. Wood-fired ovens, cast-iron skillets, rusty lids, and a choreographed dance of managing the fire gave the feeling of being a sorceress. To cook in this way required imagination and faith. This mystifying culinary waltz is summed up perfectly in my mother’s own words:

“For my grandmother, recipes were a cityfied, fangled thing. Cooking was learned at your mother and grandmother’s knee. Cooking was about using only your senses: touch, feel, smell, and taste. It was also about memory, memory of people long gone, whose immortality is expressed in the pie, the biscuits, or the gravy. In memory, there is resurrection, and my desire in cooking is simply that: resurrection.”

So this glorious (yet fangled) recipe, the best of its kind (I may be a little biased), is preserved by my mother as a celebration, a culinary badge of honor, and a sacred text. The recipe has a story.

Southern food tells us where we are, who we are, and where we’ve been. And, it just might tell us where we’re going.

Austin Anthony is a graduate student pursuing a master’s degree in English with a concentration in rhetoric and professional writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. When he’s not working on graduate related projects, he enjoys rock climbing, petting cats, and studying foreign languages.
What’s your inspiration for what you do?
I want to do more than just survive. If I’m going to be black and a woman in America, I need to be better. I work hard and want to reap the benefits of travel and enjoying other cultures.

What’s the most rewarding thing about it?
The people. I enjoy the patrons and my co-workers. I like being the best and the fastest at what I do. It’s important to me. I had the honor of being nominated Best Bartender of Chattanooga. I’ve been told I am the most caring. Sometimes bartenders might not notice or pay attention, but I’ll tell a patron I care too much about their well-being and offer them water if I’ve noticed they’ve reached that point of bliss.

What’s your biggest challenge?
Patience, definitely.

What does it mean to be a Southern woman?
Without the black? Because you know there is a difference. White Southern women are free to do whatever they want with minimal consequences.

And a black Southern woman?
Personally, my God, my Jesus is understanding and forgiving instead of vengeful. My church and religious upbringing didn’t focus on the guilt of hell. More so, humans make mistakes and it’s important to ask for forgiveness and try our best to do better—be better people. We go to church, and then after service we say ‘who’s up for a cocktail?’ Black Southern women also have more respect for family traditions. They view traditions as not just a time to recognize the holiday, but the importance is placed on the family coming together. There is more emphasis on being with everyone rather than it being Christmas, or whatever. And cooking is also really important. Southern black women organize family cookouts and put a lot of energy and pride into the preparation of food. We also believe that if you are rich in health, that’s all you need. You may not have $5 to your name, but if you have your health, then you are good.
DEDICATION
This play is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Olga Woltering from Acworth, Georgia, who lost her life in the Ft. Lauderdale Airport Shooting on January 6, 2017.

CHARACTERS
Her: female-identifying, 84. British-American

SETTING
The Hartsfield-Jackson International airport.

TIME
January 6, 2017.

LIGHTS UP on the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, domestic terminal. Hustle and bustle. Sounds of flights being called; sounds of rolling suitcases; sounds of children laughing and crying. Sounds of many lives.

HIM, a young 90, and HER, a young 84, waiting for their flight to Ft. Lauderdale.

SHE reads a book or magazine. HE watches her.
A few moments of comfortable silence.

HIM: How many times have we, do you think?
HER: In sixty-four years? No telling, lovey.
HIM: A hundred?
HER: That few?!
HIM: Five hundred, then.
HER: A thousand at least.
HIM: Want to try for a thousand and one?
HER: We’re not alone!
HIM: When has that ever mattered?
HER: No one wants to see a couple of old foggies doing... that in public.
HIM: We’re not so old.
HER: We are to them.
HIM: They don’t matter.
HER: (gentle) Give it a rest, lovey.
A pause.
HIM: But don’t you remember our first?
HER: I could never forget.
HIM: The Air Force ball. That red dress, that blush on your cheek.
HER: That was a flush, I was getting over a cold.
HIM: You were radiant.
HER: (flirty) Oh, hush.
A beat.
HIM: And our wedding night? That big full skirt, a thousand miles of lace. How it whooshed around.
HER: You’re in quite the mood today!
HIM: A man can dream of old times on his ninetieth birthday.
HER: Well let’s leave it at that, then: merry old dreams.
HIM: I’d rather not.
HER: Lovey, we start boarding any minute. Let’s just rest.

A pause.

HIM: The jitterbug contest?
SHE laughs.
HER: We won! All that champagne!
HIM: Everyone else stopped dancing to watch you.
HER: Oh, they did not.
HIM: They did. Just like that time you jumped up on the bar and danced a jig.
HER: Oh, I can’t believe you let me do that!
HIM: There’s no “letting you” do anything, dear.
HER: That feels like ages ago.
HIM: It feels like yesterday.
SHE smiles, pats HIS arm. Goes back to reading.

A long beat. Then, HE stands and offers HIS hand to her.
HER: Oh, knock it off, love.
HIM: You’ll deny me the only birthday present I’ve asked for?
HER: Your birthday present is the reason we’re here at the airport, if you remember correctly. A cruise with the whole family? Ring any bells?
HIM: I’d trade it all to dance with you.
HER: Lovey...
HE begins to sing Sidney Prosen’s “Til I Waltz Again With You.”

HIM: (singing) Til I waltz again with you Let no other hold your charms
HER: Lovey!
HIM: The first song we ever danced to, at the Air Force ball.
HER: People are staring!
HE: begins singing louder.
HIM: (singing) If my dreams should all come true You’ll be waiting for my arms SHE’s laughing. SHE rises. SHE takes HIS hand. HE hums as they begin to dance.

As they dance, the years move in reverse. The sounds of the airport fade and are replaced with HIM and HER humming or singing “Til I Waltz Again With You.”
They grow younger and younger and younger, until SHE is 19 and HE is 25. SHE twirls away from HIM.
It is the night of the Air Force ball. SHE’s wearing her red dress.
They see each other for the first time. HE approaches HER and extends his hand.
HIM: Do you care to dance?
HER: Always.
SHE takes HIS hand. They dance and dance and dance.
LIGHTS fade.

END OF PLAY
SYNOPSIS
A perfectly good-natured, respectable Southern woman is just trying to start her day of work when she’s harassed by a coworker.

CHARACTERS
Her: female-identifying, mid-20s. This is her first “grownup” job, bless her. She’s wearing a modest business-y pencil skirt/dress. Also, she’s a werewolf.

SETTING

TIME
Every day in corporate America.

LIGHTS UP on the exterior of an elevator. DING. Elevator doors open and SHE appears. SHE’s feeling confident today: she’s got her Confidence Outfit, her Confidence Coffee, her Confidence Hair. Deep breath, shoulders back. SHE starts to head toward her office. HER heels CLICK CLACK on the tile floor.

HE enters. He’s also, strangely, extremely confident for some reason. He always has been. He’s just that kinda guy.

HE looks HER up and down, watching HER walk. Maybe HE even licks his lips – yeah, that kinda guy. SHE feels his eyes on her, adjusts her CLICK CLACK tempo.

HIM (under his breath) Yeah, shake it, baby.

SHE stops. SHE turns. They lock eyes. HE chuckles and starts to turn away.

Suddenly, SHE transforms! Uh oh! SHE’s a werewolf! SHE transforms whenever encountering sexual harassment in the workplace!

HE freezes in terror. SHE leaps on HIM and rips his face off! Blood everywhere! SHE licks her lips. SHE HOWLS.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY
On my worst days, when I belong nowhere, I take to the woods like a rabid ghost. A bizarre astral projection in the black hollows of my homeland, begging for solutions to problems earned by blood and purchased in vows. I dig through clover and dark soil and red clay, I tear my clothes in the brambles, and I come up empty-handed.

But on certain summer evenings, it gets too hot to move or drive or cook and the trees encircling my house sag under the weight of impossible humidity. So I sit in the backyard in shorts and a ratty tank top. Forearms streaked with red clay where I’ve been weeding the garden, hands choked around the neck of a half-full wine bottle, silently hoping it hasn’t vinegared.

I turn the dogs loose across the rusted metal stripping of the threshold. They run the border of my yard, noses to the northeast, and sniff in the blackberry brambles while mockingbirds flee the privet. It gets all thick and still, nothing but the crickets screaming through the Mackey Branch creek bottom while the woods simmer with the wind riding the heels of the thunderheads stacked and bruised over the oak tops, greener than usual.

The air kicks through the grass, scoops the heat off my small concrete patio, and balloons through my shirt. When it’s like this, I cross my legs in a patch of clover and white flowers wind through my toes. I uncork the bottle and as I sip straight from the smooth, cold lip, and as the red blend that has seen better days hits my tongue, the first rumble collapses across this tuft of land, folding everything into its patch of time, vibrating off the ridge before descending into the hollow. It is in every space.

Summer storms in the American Southeast seem to be one of the few guarantees in life. As sure as the Utah desert I’d grown to love would suck every particle of moisture from me, so the all-consuming rains
of Tennessee would fill every corner. I receive messages from my parents in Memphis, my grandparents in Johnson City, my in-laws across the street. They alert me to the weather, ask when it’s supposed to hit us, remind me to move my car from under the towering oaks in front of my house, caution me not to get knocked into next week by the hail. The warnings and concerns are less sincere and more for good measure. We’ve all gone this long weathering the storms—what damage could one more do?

So, on the days the storms come and flood the trails over, and I cannot take to the woods, I am supposed to be here in my backyard. Dirty and ready and a little buzzed, a bit smug for remembering the wine before it was too far gone, I choke on a giggle, as I imagine the squatters in the surrounding woods, their meth fires being snuffed out one fat raindrop at a time. Their muddy, twitching rage.

The squatters had likely been there for weeks—just at the end of a rutted-out road that the rightful landowner never seemed to bother with—before anyone knew something was amiss. By the time the police showed to bust up their operation, the landowner had already come through with an excavator and tore through their trailer, leaving foam mattress remnants and odd bits of piping and plastic storage bins scattered in the woods.

I suppose having meth heads camping in the woods is no laughing matter. It’s the pitch black irony of their odd proximity, the swamped wasteland dividing us, and the woods we share. The neighborhood hysteria concerning addicts roaming in the undergrowth along Mackey Branch, juxtaposed with no trace of admonishment for the ones living in nice homes and driving nice cars. Keep it secret, keep it safe, this can’t be us, therefore it isn’t. It’s wrong to think this way. But it’s easy to fall back into our southern shadows, to languish in the shade of the dark hogs that raised us. Forgetting what the world has taught us goes down smooth as 140 proof apple pie, to slip over the slick glass edge of that Kerr jar and convince ourselves we’re without fault.

My husband said he would have excavated the meth camp, too. He once told me a story about a friend in prison who would make a game of setting traps for the addicts and watching them scramble. Said they were like mice, never really knowing what was going on. So as my clothesline snaps in the breeze and the wine continues its journey, tingling behind my jaw just beneath my earlobes, I think about how the creek will rise and I envision ten or so mice scurrying through the woods, fleeing as the water moccasins and mud seep through their nest just a short distance from my house. Where would they go? I see my husband driving an excavator through the creek bottom, only to recognize his own face in one of the terrified mice—but it’s too late.

My husband is collared and clean-cut, somewhere on the other side of the railroad negotiating a soggy field in his old truck, checking traps. Only a modicum of things truly separates him from the mice in the woods: a quarter mile, a different tax bracket, and an underlying privilege that he has trouble understanding. A different sort of shell cursed with old stories and hurt as real and dense as the soggy clay that swells around the foundations of our home with every soaking storm.

I wish I could replace the recliner he’d taken to sleeping in with a camp chair by a fire in the belly of the San Rafael Swell, exchange the darkened spots beneath his eyes for a sunburn sprouting on his face from a day spent among the red rocks. I wish I could excavate his medicine cabinet to make more room for living.

I wish I could talk about the secret chemical evils that render life fragile. I’ve come so far, I’ve cocooned the torn muscles of emotional labor in bourbon and setting fire to piles of cardboard in my backyard. Now there is no belle in me, barefoot and smoke-smudged, a 9mm in my left hand as branches snap in the woods under smooth coyote paws or someone setting up camp.

I wish I could call out and discover who they are. Tell them the mosquitoes aren’t as bad in the clearing of our yard, that I made too much chicken soup and if they’d wait just a few minutes the bread would be out of the oven. But I hear people trying to protect me. “Carry the gun. Lock the doors.” Yet they walk across my threshold day in, day out, wearing the faces of people I love, and I open the door and I hand them a beer and my dogs know them by ear scratches and Wes knows them as childhood friends, and I know it all as a sadness I can’t fix.

I wish I was some harbinger of change. Maybe I could be if not so devoted to my own pain. Instead, I take flasks into the forest and hike drunk past old TNT bunkers when the sun is out. I sit itching in my backyard, waiting for a rainstorm with a bottle pressed to my lips, sweat beading in the crease behind my bent knees and anger hollowing out space just beneath my clavicle like worms in a perfectly good pecan.

I look at my life, and what it is despite my curated attempts to shape-shift. To polish my story away
from the stereotype of what it means to be from the South. Caked in the fear of being stuck, every effort like swimming through molasses. My accent was abandoned long ago, and my culinary prowess ventures well beyond the breaded and fried. My middle-class upbringing was in my favor and somehow I still became the collateral damage of redneck jokes made real. Simmering chicken stock in cast iron, canning apricots while pretending the people around me weren’t wasting away from pills or loneliness or inherited rage.

All I can do is grip broken secrets—their shame or pain becoming mine, hushing the person who learned to be open under a wide expanse of red and sagebrush. The one who got help, started asking for what she needed, and found life in the struggle for oxygen on high peaks. I can go west all I want, change how I eat, adjust my worldview, find God, lose him again, cut my hair. But I’m undone by the borders of my home, and crawl back to the secrets, once more convinced that my worth lies in protecting the people I love from themselves. I can work the job and wear the lipstick and live in the desert but my magnetics work too well. They will always draw on the girl who likes a reason to stagnate with her problems, blaming the mosquitoes for biting when she made the choice to stand in still water. Nothing to write home about, but something to write something about.

I shake off the stale patterns around me by creating my own. When the storms blow over I become unsettled, chasing the cold and the shade of the old trees, kicking through rot and undergrowth all dead leaves pressed into the earth, the wet smell wicking upwards. In my movement, everything I resent becomes recognizable—something I can work with and shape and bend, the illusion of action. If I can move with the secrets and the systems and “how it’s always been,” if I can take them to the woods and empty them into the rock outcroppings and root systems, if I can feel the wind scrubbing it from my shoulders on the high balds, if I can dump it all from the peak into the valley below, and let the summer storms hold them in thrall, they become stronger, easier, a little less heartbreaking.

Liv Tipton graduated from UTC with a Bachelor’s in English. She now lives in a camper in Heber City, UT with her husband and two dogs. Between questioning her decision to live in a camper and being a snowboarding instructor, she can be found consuming quantities of coffee that do not bode well for her anxiety, and hiking with her dogs along the Provo River.
Southern Rock

Women Rock Climbers in Chattanooga

TRACY TABACZYNSKI

Southern rock lured me to Chattanooga. Not music, though the town is renowned for its variety of festivals and venues, but the literal, physical, geologic rock.

Visible from any highway leading into the city, stretching hundreds of feet into the sky, Chattanooga’s broad swaths of sandstone cliffs are capturing national attention and beckoning rock climbers to the area. I am one.

Last August, tired of chill Northern winters full of snow, tired of driving five hours every weekend to find climbable rock, I quit my job, sold most of my belongings, tucked my cat into my car, and drove south.

I join a growing flock of transplanted climbers. “Nearly every week I meet someone who just moved to town for the climbing,” says climber and writer Sarah Anne Perry, who relocated to Chattanooga last year after travelling and climbing throughout South America and the American west.

Chattanooga is fast becoming an epicenter of American rock climbing. Climbing magazine dubbed the town “America’s New Climbing Capital” in 2016, and followed up with a feature article in 2018. The city has won other recent accolades as well, named Outside magazine’s “Best Town” in 2011 and 2015, the only city to win twice.

“The publicity is certainly having a big effect,” says Cody Roney, who for five years headed the Southeastern Climbers Coalition, a regional organization. “When I first moved here, I knew every single climber. Now that’s unimaginable.”

Formed more than 300 million years ago from sand and pebbles that washed out of the Appalachians when they were higher than the Himalayas, Chatta-
nooga’s crags offer intricate features that climbers relish. There are vertical and horizontal cracks, chunky blocks, pockets and rails to grab onto and more, an irresistible diversity of challenges.

Look closely as you drive along one of Chattanooga’s highways on a sunny day and you may see a small dot of bright color inching its way up a cliff. I may be one of those dots clinging to the rock, equidistant between ground and sky, striving to reach the top before my arms and fingers give out.

Chattanooga may be drawing a diverse community of climbers from all over the country, but as a lifelong Northerner, my head full of Southern stereotypes, I had concerns. What would it be like as an athletic woman in the South? Would I be expected to conform to some of these stereotypes? Would I have to be feminine, dress carefully, wear make-up, look nice, actually be nice?

Southern women may be regarded as Steel Magnolias, stern resolve under soft feminine exteriors, but these Southern rock climbers are literal women of steel. They are challenging what has long been perceived as the boys’ club of rock climbing.

At a party my first week in town, another woman came up to me and ran her finger over my shoulder and arm. “How did you get such muscle definition?” she asked. “How can I get it too?” I invited her climbing.

While many climbers initially move to town for the rock, they say they end up staying for the community. Chattanooga’s climbing community, estimated to be about 3,000 local inhabitants by a recent economic study, may be its greatest strength.

“It’s the community that keeps people climbing here, the people and the support,” says Lyndsey Cutler, who works as a route-setter at a local climbing gym and moved to Chattanooga several years ago.

This may be especially true for women. A notable feature of Chattanooga’s climbing community is its gender balance. Local climbers estimate that 40-50% of Chattanooga climbers may be women. By contrast, a 2017 Climbing magazine survey found that only 21% of its readers were women, suggesting a greater gender disparity nationwide.

“I do think there’s more women here than in other communities,” says Roney, who has seen Chattanooga’s exponential growth as a climbing center. “It is a welcoming town for women.”

Rock climbing has typically been perceived as a male dominated sport. While there are a handful of well-known women climbers, men grab headlines, magazine covers, and the popular imagination. For instance, women appeared on only 19% of the covers of Climbing magazine over the 10-year period from 2006 to 2016.

But this male focus is beginning to shift. Women and girls represented about 40% of climbing competitors from 2014-2019, according to The American Bouldering Series, which sponsors competitions nationwide. This figure represents a 10% increase from 2006. And one of the sport’s most accomplished climbers, thought by many to be the best climber in the world and likely to compete at the 2020 Olympics when rock climbing makes its debut, is an American teenage girl named Ashima Shiraishi.

Southern women may be regarded as Steel Magnolias, stern resolve under soft feminine exteriors, but these Southern rock climbers are literal women of steel. They are challenging what has long been perceived as the boys’ club of rock climbing, as well as stereotypes of femininity and women’s bodies with their sculpted shoulders and finely delineated biceps.

To learn more about Chattanooga’s community of women climbers, I spoke to a number of these women. I asked about their experiences with stereotypes, their perception of community, what drove them to climb and what kept them climbing.

Why do women, or anyone for that matter, climb?

For some, the appeal lies in the pure physical challenge of the sport. Others enjoy the mental aspect, the puzzle-solving involved in locating hand and foot holds and assembling them into a successful sequence of moves. Most say it’s a combination of the physical and mental aspects, which requires total attention to the moment and clears the brain of any distracting thoughts.

“It’s what I chase when I climb,” says Beth Suker, who has been climbing for four years and moved to Chattanooga from Toronto about a year ago. “I love
the meditative state I can achieve when I am really focused.”

The goal of climbing is tangible—reach the top without falling. “I like the fact that it has a specific focus on success,” says Bethany Macke, a personal trainer who has been climbing in Chattanooga for 10 years. “And those elements of strength and conditioning. You can train for success. Anybody who is willing to put in the time can do it, you don’t have to have a specific body type.”

Women’s bodies may work to their advantage in climbing, providing them an edge over men in some aspects. “Women have a lot of strength for their size relative to men,” says Macke. “They also tend to have greater flexibility, and advantages with their smaller hands and fingers,” so they can grab onto small holds or jam their fingers into slight openings in the rock that men may be unable to use.

The physical body transformation that climbing brings about may be rewarding as well. “One of the most positive aspects for me is my body image,” says Perry. “I now focus on what my body can do rather than just on how I look. I never considered myself an athlete before, never considered myself strong. It’s amazing to see what your body is capable of, what you can push it to do.”

But women face some challenges. “I think women face a stereotype of being less bold,” says Macke. More than anything else, rock climbing may be a sport of confidence. What’s going on inside your head can be as important as what’s happening on the rock. Often it is these inner challenges, more than the physical challenges, that hold women back.

“Sometimes you have to battle your own inner thoughts,” says Cutler. “Sometimes you feel outnumbered by the guys. If you’re the only woman trying a route, it may feel harder because you haven’t seen any other women do it.”

Many spoke of the benefit of climbing with other women. “The community of women who climb here is the strongest—metaphorically and literally—that I’ve ever experienced,” says Dana Passman, who started climbing while in college in North Carolina. “It’s great to be able to share the same [advice], and work out problems with someone who has similar body types and experiences.”

Role models can provide motivation and boost confidence. “It’s really satisfying to see women climb, to think, if she can do it, I can do it. Other women give you more accountability,” says Perry.

“You have no excuse.” Cutler agrees. “It’s not that you think you can’t do it because you’re a woman. But if you know another woman has done it, then you know it’s possible and that gives you confidence.”

Chattanooga is fast becoming a hub for women climbers. Flash Foxy, an organization founded to bring women climbers together, is preparing to hold its 3rd annual Women’s Climbing Festival in the area this fall. Its 2018 festival brought more than 343 women from 41 states and 3 different countries to town.

“I see a lot of growth in climbing for women supporting women,” says Macke. “There’s a tremendous amount of women getting into climbing—as there should be.” Macke has provided workshops for women climbers with She Moves Mountains East, a female-focused climbing guide service based locally that aims to empower women. Macke is working toward becoming a certified guide herself.

“The rise of the female specific climbing organizations is a brand new development here,” says Verena Draper, a climber of 27 years who has pioneered local routes. “I am not really sure what to think of it. I don’t think women become more empowered by separating themselves from men, but instead need to reimage themselves as who they want to be.”

Many women feel climbing can help them build skills to transfer to other areas of their lives. “We may not always be confident in every part of our lives,” says Cutler. “But climbing is one activity where you do it for yourself. It makes me feel fearless.”

“Trying hard is its own skill you need to develop,” says Perry. “The focus learned from climbing has been beneficial in other areas of my life. I’ve learned to take ownership of my actions, like instead of ‘hoping’ to do
well to ‘expecting’ to do well.”

“I’m so glad to have found climbing,” says Macke. “I think you’re able to take your experience into other areas in life, to be more bold and independent and confident. Women should use these skills they learn from climbing, and apply them to their identity, to their field of work, and to their families.”

“When I lay in bed at night, my body aching everywhere, my fingertips burning, I wonder why I do this,” says Josie Benson, a New England climber who often visits Chattanooga. “Ultimately, I think it’s for the feeling of control and mastery you gain over your body and by extension your life. Like, I put in all this work to get strong, and now I can do it, I can hold onto that rock, I can reach the top. It’s empowering. I can do anything.”

On a sunny, 63-degree day in December, my daughter and I hike up Mowbray Mountain to reach the exposed rock. The hope of days like this is why I moved to Chattanooga. We lay our gear out on the ground: our harnesses, the coiled blue rope all silky and shimmery in the sun, the glinting carabiners we will clip to the rock. It is early, and dew still gleams everywhere, giving the rock a metallic sheen.

My daughter ties one end of the rope to her harness. I thread a section of the rope through my belay device, a metal contraption that will clamp down on the rope if she falls and keep her aloft, the weight of my body a counterbalance to hers.

The rock wall towers in front of us, 100 feet of undulating black and orange sandstone bands, peppered with protruding pebbles and small pockets.

She powders her hands with chalk to increase the friction of her grip. She wraps her left hand around a small knob, sets her right hand against the wall, tenses her body and swings her left leg out. Her toes land precisely on a pebbly ridge and she leverages her body up. She is off the ground.

As she ascends the rock, a group of three women arrive and start to set up nearby. About 50 feet up, my daughter pauses, holding on with one hand and wiping the other hand on her thigh. “It’s a little wet,” she says. “My hands are slipping.”

“You’ve got it,” I tell her. “Put your weight on your feet. You can do it.”

She climbs a bit higher, reaches a ledge she can stand on, pauses again. “Slippery,” she says. “I don’t think I can hold on. I’m going to fall.”

While no climber wants to fall, falling is an accepted part of climbing. It happens in an instant.

She starts again, gripping the rock fiercely, which I know will tire her out faster.

Her left foot skitters off and she dangles for a moment, holding on with her fingertips. I feel a sympathetic rush of vertigo. I start to offer more words of support, but before I can, I hear voices from behind me.

“You go girl! Stick with it.” It is the other women climbers, who have been watching her progress.

“Stay strong!” shouts another. “You’re crushing it!”

My daughter grins, energized. She slots her foot into a pocket and reaches up, fingers searching for a hold. She pulls up another few feet.

“You’re doing great. You’re almost there.” The three women have crowded closer, still shouting encouragement. My daughter looks up. Twenty feet above her are the anchors, metal bolts drilled into the rock that she will thread the rope through in order to lower back down to the ground.

She reaches up again. And again. She slips, catches her balance. And again.

“Keep going! Almost there.” Our voices blend together. “You’ve got this!”

And then she is there.

Tracy Tabaczynski recently moved to Chattanooga after spending all her life in the Northeast and Midwest. She is not missing the snow.
Born on Easter morning, I was showered with bunnies and pink, frilly things. Surely this was an omen. My future was going to be filled with beauty pageants, ballet recitals, and Easter dresses galore. I would be the little princess every Southern mother felt she deserved. Mom would fuss over my hair and makeup and show me how to walk in heels. I’m 42, and I still can’t walk properly in those damn things.

I had been writing since I was very young, but as Fate would have it, I ended up with a mechanical aptitude that outshines most men. So much so that the U.S. military sought me out just as I was wrapping up my senior year of high school. The Army recruiter, a towering and intimidating man, said, “Your mechanical aptitude score is higher than all of the young men in your graduating class.”

I said nothing, terrified I would commit to something I’d regret. “We would like to offer you the opportunity to work on planes and tanks for the U.S. Army,” he said. I was thrilled and flattered, but I was sure my parents would frown upon enlistment. Instead, I made use of my skills in the family business.

My dad’s auto repair shop was a place filled with great memories that made for great stories. My journals were filled with them. I remember seeing, for the first time, the calendar with a sexy woman splayed across an antique car, thinking how pretty she was but also how silly she looked. Newspaper cutouts of quirky cartoons poked fun at anti-gun supporters that made me chuckle even though I had no idea at that time what they meant: “Guns kill people; spoons made me fat.” Broken parts met their fate in a fit of rage as they were humorously hurled across the garage like a Southern version of the Olympic shot put. But I was indifferent to all this and focused on the endless rows of tools that solved any mechanical issue. Within those walls, I had no restrictions. My imagination was free to build, destroy, repair, and invent—just like in my journals.

My brother has a mechanical ability that rivals MacGyver. He’s that guy who can build a space shut-
tle with a tampon and a pine cone. But he had zero interest in learning the family business and succeeding our father, as is the expectation for every young man in the South.

But what about young women? I feared a domesticated life filled with stretch marks, horrendous vinyl kitchen flooring, and parent/teacher meetings where I would be lectured because, “little Cody keeps using the F-word.”

Once in my twenties, I landed a new job as an industrial mechanic for a local, large-scale bakery, using the skills I had learned in my dad’s garage. My dad and brother surprised me with a bright, cherry-red Craftsman rolling toolbox. Dad took me to Sears to fill it with wrenches and power tools needed for my new job. While standing there with my tool list, listening to the elevator-type music playing throughout the store, it occurred to me that I had managed to dodge the obligatory shopping for clothes and shoes with my mother that happens when you land your first office job.

At this point, my mother had given up on her little princess. She had to settle for a tomboy with zero ability to navigate the complicated terrain of dating and no substantial interest in it anyway. Her dreams of tiaras and big hair were dashed.

I had been working at the bakery on the line for six months before applying for a position in maintenance. The amount of backlash I experienced to get the interview was like something out of the ‘40s or ‘50s. Women in the HR department tried to sabotage the application process by telling me I could not apply—that I had not fulfilled the six month probation period required before an employee could switch positions within the plant. I decided to approach the Plant Superintendent at the gym in the swimming pool (yes, in the pool). I asked him what I needed to do to apply for the job. He said, “Tell those ladies in HR I said you can apply.” Reluctantly, they handed over the paperwork but assured me that I would not get the job.

The interview questions were much like the ones on the ASVAB test that I took in high school. It was midnight, and I’d just wrapped up my shift in the plant as a line worker. The final question was, “What accomplishment in your life are you most proud of?”

I panicked. I mean who asks that! That is profound. That’s like asking me how to solve the water crisis in a developing country. Think. Think. Think. Fatigue was taking over. All I could think about was going to bed. But this was important. I knew my dad would be proud of me, but most importantly, I would be proud of me. It hit me. I replied, “I drive it every day!” The maintenance supervisor’s forehead wrinkled, and he said, “What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath and began to explain, “I bought a 1994 Toyota 4-Runner that hit a telephone pole on the passenger side.” Instead of a painting party where you invite all your buddies over to paint the interior of your house, I had a car dissection party where my buddies were asked to lift the vehicle body off the frame and place it to the side so I could focus on the frame only. I continued to use hand gestures to indicate the physical process of placing one thing here and another thing over here and so on and so forth.

My dad’s business started as a rebuild shop for wrecked cars, so every car I have ever owned was a rebuilt wreck. The motor sat in one area of the garage with the transmission in another. I worked on each portion of the project one part at a time. The old frame was slowly stripped, and the brake lines and other driveline parts moved over to the new frame in preparation to return the body to its proper place.

Normal projects typically take weeks. The Toyota project took eight months.

As I made my way into the plant just after getting my new position, a woman from human resources at another plant approached me in the hallway. I had never seen her before. She stuck out her hand and said, “Thank you.” Slowly, I lifted my hand to shake hers and reluctantly replied, “You’re welcome.” For what? I had no idea at the time. Years later I understood what my supervisor had done. He had decided to take a chance. He knew I could do the job and made a point to tell me so despite the struggles that could be ahead.

I was sitting in the breakroom one day having lunch when a middle-aged, male line worker spoke up, “Your headlights are on.” I looked down at my chest. Yep. My breasts were healthily pointing the way. The guys. One was a much older, gruff woman who the demeanor of Clint Eastwood. I’m pretty sure
she ate nails for breakfast and shit tacks. The other was openly lesbian and everyone respected her for it. Both were characters with a great sense of humor and quickly became my allies.

Despite the occasional lewd comment by an older man at the bakery, I was harassed by more women than men—even in my own garage. One day I heard a female customer enter the garage office and speak to my dad. I waited for them to enter the garage before I greeted her. I kept looking at her anticipating a conversation to walk her through what all I had done, but she would never make eye contact. Speaking only to my dad, it was clear that my role was unacceptable. I was supposed to be doing something more appropriate like hosting Tupperware parties or selling Amway—who knows.

I had no desire to be a medical professional, a K-12 teacher, or a business executive. I wanted to be a writer. Turning wrenches was a means to an end—or so I thought. My job as a line mechanic was eventually cut due to downsizing. I returned to school full-time. In order to make the same amount of money, I had to take on several jobs, including returning to work in my dad’s garage.

One day after work, I entered the local newspaper and asked to speak to the managing editor. The woman at the front desk stared dumbfounded at my attire. Clearly, a red bandana and greasy work clothes were not the norm. I had woken up and realized that I had a duty to myself to pursue a writing career. She reluctantly sent me to the editor. His coke-bottle glasses made his eyes look enormous. He, too, stared, puzzled by my presence. After an awkward pause, I blurted out, “I want to write for you.” This was followed by more awkward pauses and more staring. He asked a few questions and as soon as we had established my beat, I had my first assignment.

This was the start to a journey that would lead me through both a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree at UTC and into a role as a professional journalist. Throughout and following college, I had to learn how to deconstruct my upbringing and what I perceived as my future and reunite them in a way that made sense to me.

Recently, my 4-year old niece watched me change the brakes on my truck. She stood beside me patiently. You could tell her little wheels were turning. She said, “Bethie, I want to be like you.” I’m pretty sure there were onions in the room. Tears. Lots of tears.

I couldn’t be prouder of her. There might be a tiara in her future, but she’s already making up her mind about who she is and who she wants to be. I don’t think I have to worry about her life journey being filled with people telling her she can’t. She already knows she can.

Beth Miller grew up in the Ocoee River area in Tennessee and attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She has been guiding mountain bike trips on the Tanasi Trail System in Ocoee since 2006. Each year she hikes a section of the Appalachian Trail hoping to complete it before she is pushing up daisies.
What’s your inspiration for what you do?
This shop was born of necessity—mine. When I moved here seven years ago, I hoped to find an independent book store, a place where I would meet like-minded people and enter the community. But the last indie closed in 2010. I had to make do with the big box chains. Try as they might, the big box chains can’t do what an independent book store with passionate readers can do, they can’t build that community. An independent book store can anchor the area, it can be that “third space,” it’s not work, not home, but a place you can come and relax and interact with others and build community. It’s also my mission to embrace the reader and the writer, to bring them together. We hold so many events to do this.

What’s the most rewarding thing about it?
Connecting with a patron over a book. The greatest thing about reading and finding books you love is being able to talk about those books with someone else. I’m all inclusive, all are welcome. We need a place to be able to have conversations, to listen to all points of view, to grow. If you don’t read and aren’t exposed to the world and different points of view and what you don’t know, how can you be empathetic and contribute to the good of the community?

What’s your biggest challenge?
Getting the community to know I’m here and to buy into the importance of what an indie book store can be. Chattanooga has such a vibrant art scene, such an appreciation for that form. This is just a different form of art, it’s word art. There’s no difference to me between books and a work of visual art. I feel like I’m hidden in plain sight.

What does it mean to be a Southern woman?
I’m grit. I’m grit because I was made to feel from the earliest age that I could do anything, anything, I ever wanted to do. My dad had two daughters, and he couldn’t be more proud than being the father of two daughters. Never was I ever made to feel I wasn’t good enough because of my gender. My earliest memory was always being told “You are strong, you are important, you are smart.” I can do anything, and it doesn’t matter that I’m from the South or that I’m female. I can identify myself as Southern and a woman and take pride in that fact, and there’s a lot of women behind me that had a tough row to hoe to get us here.
Still in her novelty nun costume, the activity therapist stuffs her oversized cross into her pocket to better hold her clipboard, as she asks her patients her usual round of orienting questions: “Do you know where you are?” “Do you know what the date it is?” “Do you remember why you’re here?”

It’s morning and sunlight has just begun to peek out across the river bend hugging the psychiatric hospital that sits beneath the shadow of Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Some of the patients answer the activity therapist’s questions with smiles saying, “We’re at Moccasin Bend and it’s Halloween,” while some of the patients say nothing and continue to shift their gaze across the different faces in the room. They are male and female, ranging in age from 18 to 65, dressed in clothes they either brought with them to the hospital or clothes the activity therapists gave them, and they are all interested in the ambient Halloween music playing in the room. As the activity therapist continues speaking, the rest of the staff behind her hold up the boombox. The sounds of rattling chains and screams are just as cartoonish as their costumes and grinning faces. I’m the only one among them not dressed up. Ryan Beckett, the lead activity therapist, who wears a macabre scarecrow mask, tells me he would have reminded me to dress up with the rest of the staff, but forgot that my job shadowing schedule had recently shifted to include Halloween.

“Wouldn’t I freak them out if I was in costume?” I ask.

“No, the patients absolutely get a kick out of this,” Beckett says. He reaches to turn up the boombox. “It’s something exciting and new for them in the ward. Everyone loves celebrating Halloween.”

That’s an activity therapist’s primary mission at Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute (MBMHI): to make sure patients have something to look forward to every day as they recover.

With only 150 beds available for the 52 counties the psychiatric hospital serves, admittance to Moccasin
Bend is a revolving door and the ward is constantly full. The goal of the staff is to help patients bounce back as fast as possible so they can return to their homes and more beds can open up. The Hollywood horror movie trope of being locked up in a straitjacket inside a white room alone forever simply doesn’t exist here. Patients spend most of the day walking around freely in their units until they’re led to an activity that is planned by Beckett’s team. As long as the patients show they are maintaining a stable state, they can take part in activities ranging from painting, to planting a garden, to cooking peach cobbler, to even taking a supervised walk on the hospital grounds. Most of the afternoons when I shadow the activity therapists, we sit on a couch with the patients and learn a new card game together. The majority of the activity therapists, including Markia Johnson, say this is their favorite part of the job.

“I get to meet different people, and I love seeing the change; how we can help someone. We have a different way of treating people here at MBMHI. I think it’s our Southern hospitality. We have a lot of love in our hearts for our patients,” Johnson says. “When I got my bachelor’s degree at University of Tennessee at Knoxville, my major was kind of taken as a joke by some people. They’d say, what are you studying? And when I’d say, recreational therapy, they’d say, what’s that—playing games?”

“It is sorta like playing games, but what most people don’t understand is there’s a therapeutic side to play,” explains Johnson, “We take our patients’ leisure interests and we use them to turn those activities into a coping mechanism they can take with them once they leave the hospital.”

The activities Johnson and her co-workers create also teach patients daily skills they can use outside of the hospital to maintain a healthy, independent lifestyle. The cooking classes in particular are the most popular among the patients. When I help an activity therapist conduct an early morning lesson on how to cook a low-calorie breakfast quiche, there’s a wide range of energy and emotions in each of the patients’ faces.

Most of the patients just want to savor the smell of the ingredients, which we pass around in a bowl for each of them to help mix, while others are eager to help measure the correct amount of spinach and bacon bits. Some of their hands shake. A few sit in the corner, fighting to keep their eyes open. Their medications can have that lethargic effect in the morning, but we encourage them to push through so they can get a taste of the finished quiche.

At one point, the plastic butter knife we’re using to cut things goes missing. For a brief moment I panic, but sure enough the activity therapist ends up being
correct when she assures me we just left the knife in a weird spot.

“In some psychiatric hospitals the staff treat the patients like they’re in trouble or untrustworthy,” Johnson tells me, “but at MBMHI we give our patients privileges in exchange for their good behavior, and they get to earn trust; we have a reward system that facilitates good behavior. This is important for when they go back into their original community and have to learn a way to regain any trust they may have originally broken with their peers.”

The emphasis on trust at MBMHI comes to my mind whenever my friends ask me if I feel safe at the hospital as a woman. Have any of the male patients threatened me? Have they thrown things at me? Have they tried to grab me? These are the questions I constantly get, but can answer no to everytime.

“When it comes to patients who may come at me, call out my name, or try to intimidate me, I just remember that I’m a Southern girl,” Johnson says. “I’m from Atlanta, Georgia. I was a server growing up and a waitress for five years at Cracker Barrel. I have a lot of patience and understanding, but I also don’t put up with that kind of bullying. It’s my Southern hospitality. I have a lot of love in my heart, but I also won’t tolerate any harassment.”

Overall, Johnson says being a woman at MBMHI doesn’t affect her like some may think it would.

“I’ve dealt with family who’ve had mental illnesses. I actually started this job to learn how I can help out more at home,” she says.

“We’re all human and we all have different struggles we’re going through.”

With all the stigmas surrounding mental health, Johnson and the other activity therapists feel it’s important for the patients to have a positive experience at MBMHI. Recently, to better help their patients retain positive memories of the psychiatric hospital, the activity therapist staff proposed an idea to have care bags available for every patient when they leave the hospital. The care bags will have the MBMHI logo, as well as a list of the patient’s medication and favorite coping skills and activities they learned with the staff.

“Working at Moccasin Bend is probably one of the lowest paying job in my field, but it’s my favorite because we have so much freedom to pilot new things, like the care bags, with our wide variety of patients,” says Johnson. “Our patients need help with stress management and we put together our creativity, knowledge, and skills to help them find a way to cope.”

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