Catalpa

a magazine *of* Southern perspectives

Spring | 2020

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Why Catalpa?

When choosing a title for our magazine, we wanted a name that would accurately and ethically represent our publication, a graduate student 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 derives from the Muscogee word for the tree, "kutuhlpa," 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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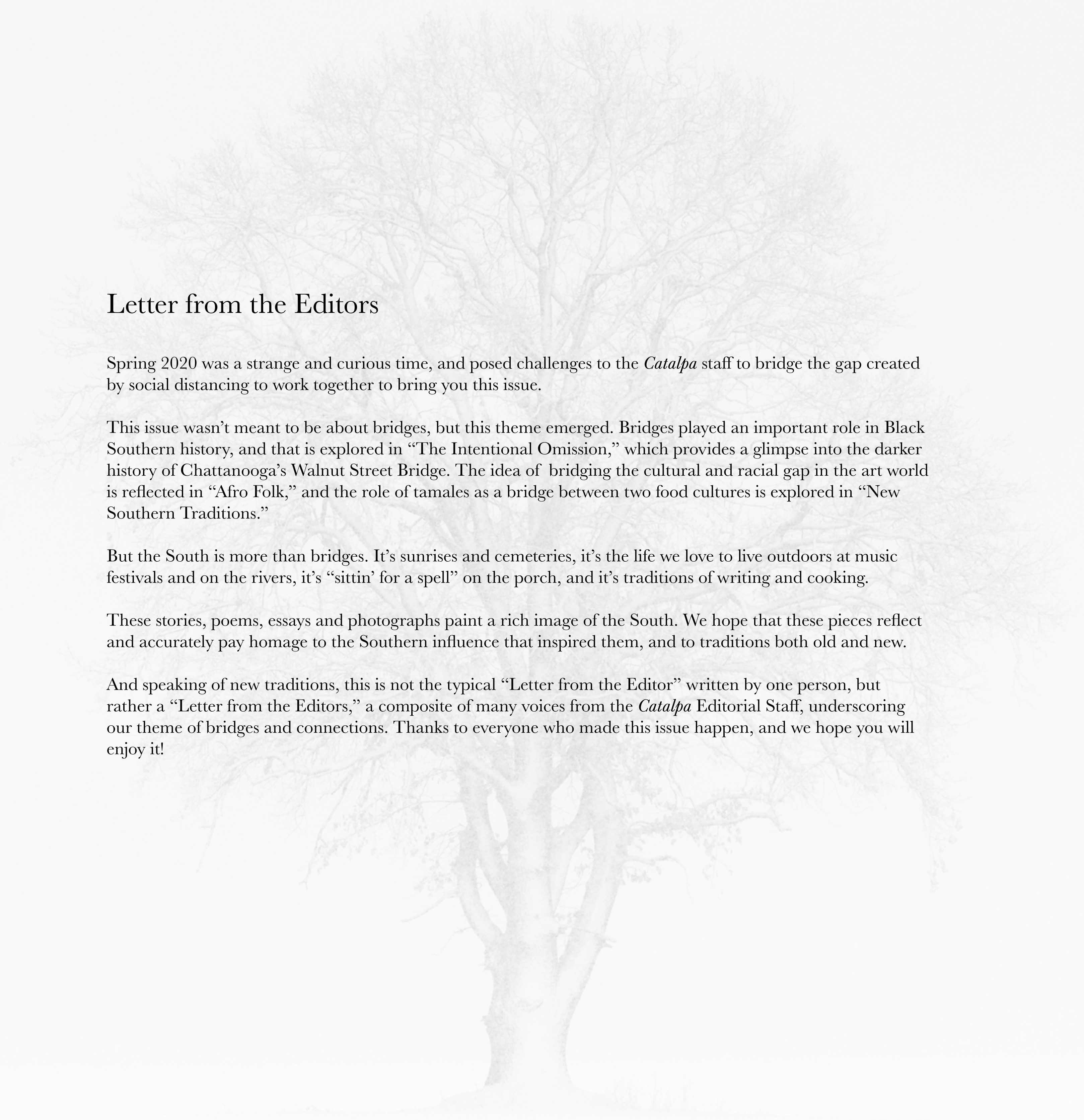

Letter from the Editors

Spring 2020 was a strange and curious time, and posed challenges to the *Catalpa* staff to bridge the gap created by social distancing to work together to bring you this issue.

This issue wasn't meant to be about bridges, but this theme emerged. Bridges played an important role in Black Southern history, and that is explored in "The Intentional Omission," which provides a glimpse into the darker history of Chattanooga's Walnut Street Bridge. The idea of bridging the cultural and racial gap in the art world is reflected in "Afro Folk," and the role of tamales as a bridge between two food cultures is explored in "New Southern Traditions."

But the South is more than bridges. It's sunrises and cemeteries, it's the life we love to live outdoors at music festivals and on the rivers, it's "sittin' for a spell" on the porch, and it's traditions of writing and cooking.

These stories, poems, essays and photographs paint a rich image of the South. We hope that these pieces reflect and accurately pay homage to the Southern influence that inspired them, and to traditions both old and new.

And speaking of new traditions, this is not the typical "Letter from the Editor" written by one person, but rather a "Letter from the Editors," a composite of many voices from the *Catalpa* Editorial Staff, underscoring our theme of bridges and connections. Thanks to everyone who made this issue happen, and we hope you will enjoy it!

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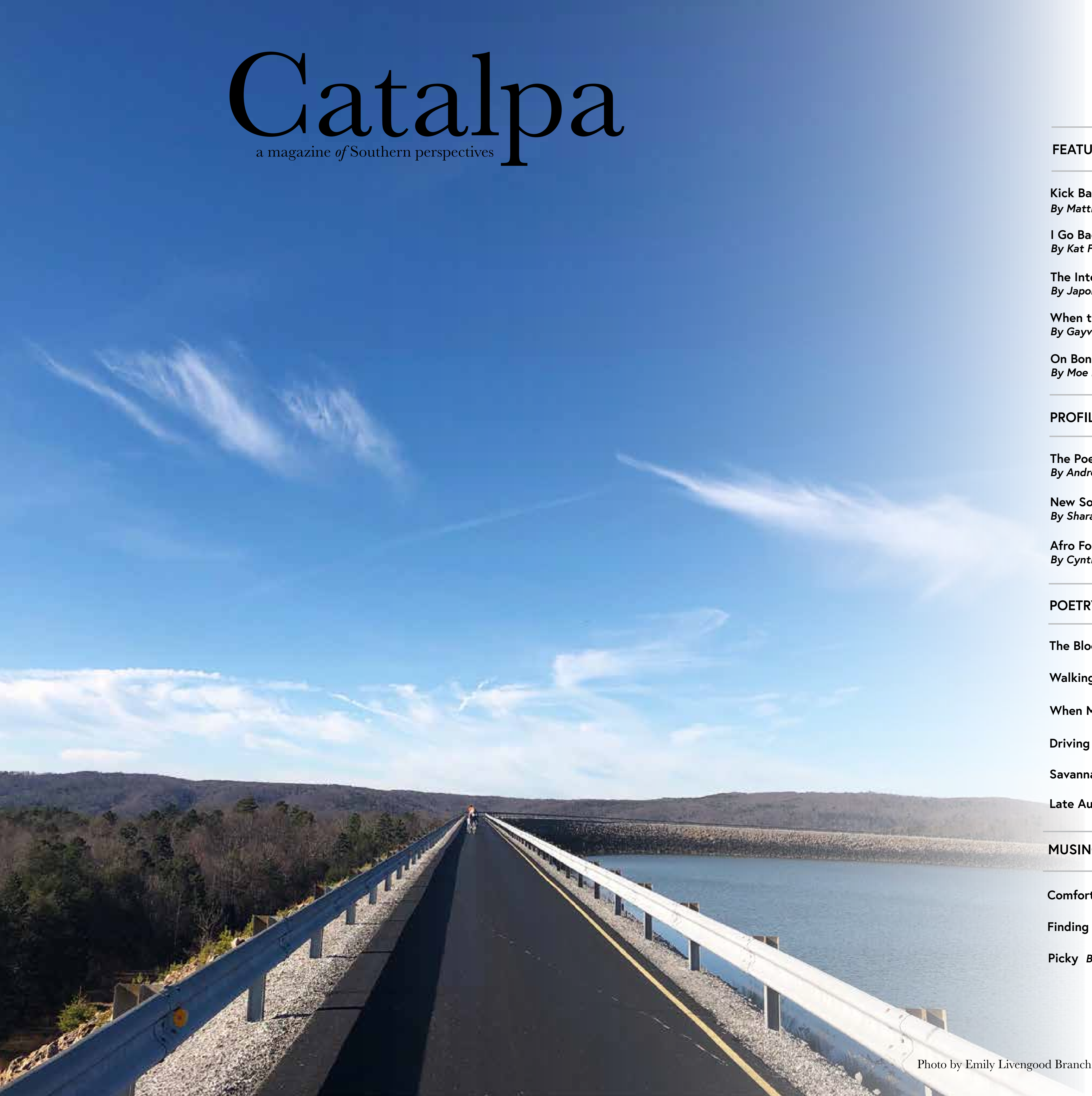

Photo by Emily Livengood Branch

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Kick Back and Relax

The Cracker Barrel and Southern Hospitality

MATTHEW GIDNEY

The Sun has riz and the sun has set, and here we is in Texas yet. I could hear my grandma's voice chanting the old saying like a cowboy song floating briskly across the empty west Texas plains. The drive from Tucson, Arizona, to Shreveport, Louisiana, was a long one, and my family used to make the trip about once a year to visit family. While the trek across Texas was long, and the land was brown and mostly empty save for the occasional cattle ranch or oil drill off in the distance, there was undeniable intrigue in watching as the land gradually transformed from a hard desert speckled with dust, shrubs and cactus to a dark green and muddy-brown swampland full of gators, cypress trees and lily pads.

Somewhere, in the middle of that long drive, we passed from the West into the South. It's hard to say where this change took place. There never was a sign reading "Welcome to the South!" While this distinction certainly isn't anything scientific that can be marked precisely on a map, one thing I remember noticing was the rapid multiplication of Cracker Barrel restaurants off the side of the highway as we drew closer to Louisiana. It became a loose tradition that we would stop at some point on the way at a Cracker Barrel, and I have since always associated the restaurant with the South.

How fair is this association though? After all, Cracker Barrel has restaurants all across the United States. Sure, the chain was founded in the South and is more common there than say, the Pacific Northwest, but couldn't you say that calling Cracker Barrel Southern is kind of like calling Taco Bell Mexican? In short, no, I don't think it's the same at all. Yes, Cracker Barrel serves up a traditional Southern dining experience in about as stereotypical a way as possible, but the Southerness of the "cracker barrel" goes beyond the popular restaurant chain and is quite intimately connected with traditional Southern culture.

In her novel *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*, Southern novelist Mary Noelles Murphy places the country store, the cracker barrel, and the porch at the center of Appalachian civilization. Writing under the pen name of Charles Egbert Craddock, Murphy has been praised for her authentic portrayal of traditional Southern Appalachian culture and dialect. The connection between the people in the novel is loose, with vast, dark forests and deadly feuds separating the sparse inhabitants of the mystical Smoky Mountains. Family units are portrayed as being essentially self sustaining. Yet, several times throughout the novel, the people come together and congregate around the cracker barrel on the porch of the store.

The porch and the cracker barrel serve as the community center. It is where people come to hear the latest news and gossip. People seeking help or refuge come there to plead their case. The voting takes place there, fights and public disputes are resolved, and of course, food and games are enjoyed. When introducing the store and its owner in *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*, Murphy establishes the fact that the surrounding farms are in no way relient on the goods at the store, as each farm was "producing within its own confines all its necessities." What the store owner did provide, though, was a comfortable, neutral meeting ground, full of genuine Southern hospitality.

Today, Cracker Barrel restaurants still embrace this heritage. All the toys, games, treats, CDs and calendars in the store portion of the restaurant are not ultimately what draw people inside. The social ritual of sharing familiar comfort food in a cozy setting does that. Old farm equipment and decorations cover the walls, looking exactly like you would imagine they looked in the old days of Southern Appalachia. The games set out on the tables are traditional games people could have been found playing out on the porch 150 years ago. Just as diners at a Cracker Barrel today enjoy not having to cook their food (or pay an arm and a leg for it either), farmers and travelers used to enjoy candy and other packaged goods at the country store that they would not have had around their homes.

The big, open porch with cozy rocking chairs, the traditional and stereotypical Southern food menu options, and the smiling gentleman on the giant billboard signs are an invitation to come in and have a seat. It's a pop cultural representation of Southern hospitality, and a celebration of the relaxed, friendly aspects of Southern culture that still prevail today.

When my family eventually moved from Arizona to North Carolina, one of the first things that struck me about our new neighbors was how quick they were to strike up a conversation. They had no qualms about walking right up into our yard and introducing themselves, chatting for hours and inviting us to participate in life with them. The long, open porch and the cracker barrel, full of something good to snack on while you visit, is still a big part of Southern culture. Instead of gathering on the porch of the nearest country store though, you can now find neighbors gathered in their cul-de-sacs or on their own front (or back) porches sharing drinks and some barbecue. This is where stories are told, social bonds are strengthened, political and religious opinions are discussed. If someone is in need, this is where people will volunteer their help. There may no longer be an actual, physical "cracker barrel" on the porch, but the tradition is very much alive.

There is a reason why the Cracker Barrel restaurant resonates so strongly with Southerners. It symbolizes some of the things their culture holds dear. The cracker barrel is the Southern invitation to slow down, kick back and visit awhile. You know you could use a biscuit and a game of checkers, and while you're here, let me tell you about what's going on with poor Miss Cathy, bless her heart…

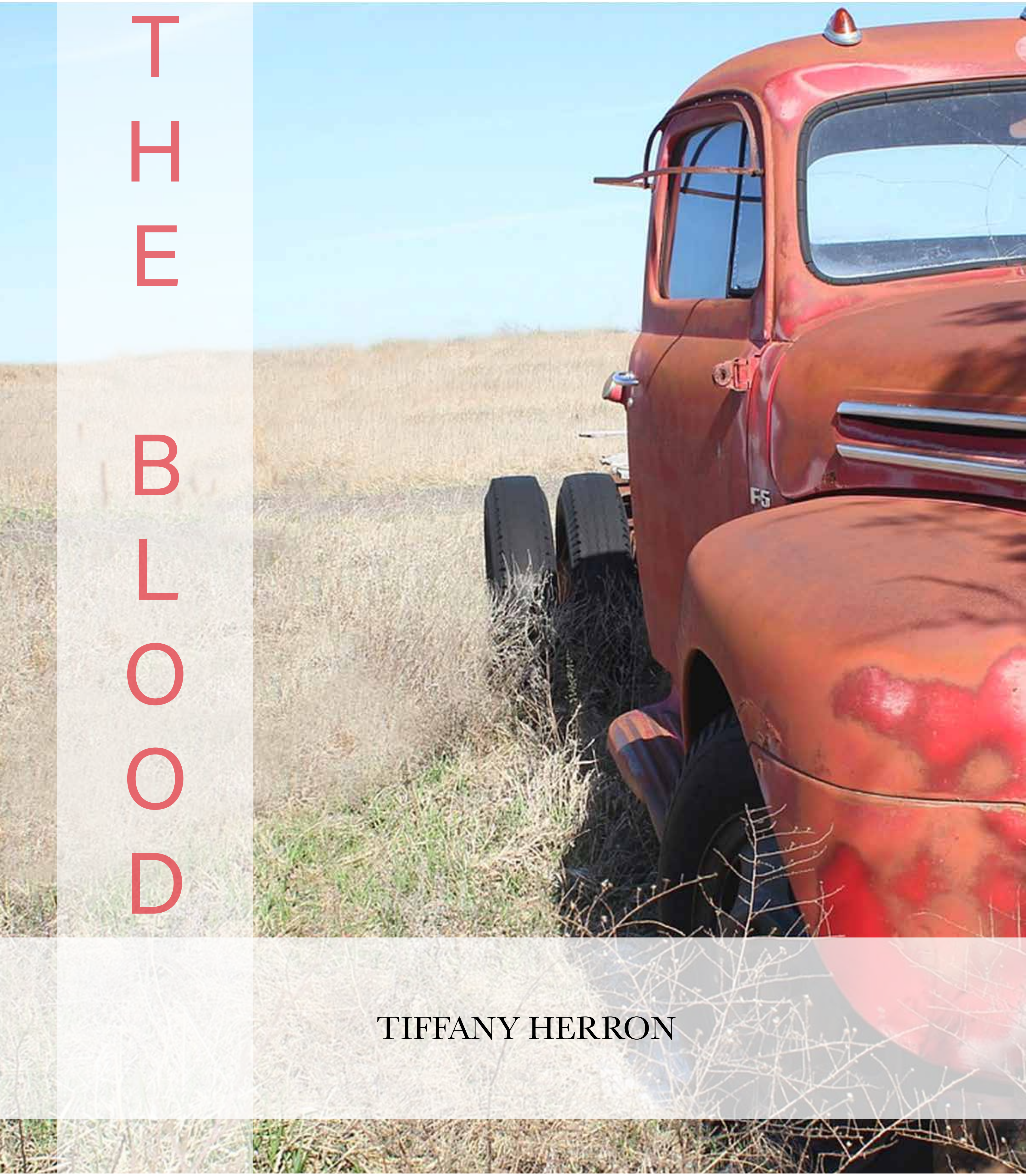
"Somewhere, in the middle of that long drive, we passed from the West into the South."

MATTHEW GIDNEY works as the education coordinator for the Epilepsy Foundation of Southeast Tennessee. He is a lover of old myths and legends and enjoys studying old Appalachia, Norse mythology, and the Wild West. Since 2017, he has been working with a primary source manuscript written by a Tennessee mountain man about his life at the dawn of the 20th century, including his experience in US cavalry and fighting in the First World War. He is a graduate student in Literary Studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is married to the prettiest nurse in Tennessee.

Photo by Terry Carpenter

THE BLOOD

TIFFANY HERRON



Betty drives a bright red truck
she calls “The Blood of Jesus.”
It baptizes the gravel drive,
following the preaching of shocks
and the tailpipe talking in tongues.
They shout their sermon to the thirsty day.

A fat cross dangles low from the rear
view mirror shooting golden sparkles
like a haloed crown, which causes the woman
to squint and howl:
Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?

Pedestrians hear the bellowing
from a far distance.
She believes the louder she sings,
the closer to her god she becomes.

She pays no attention to the sinners.
Most know to get out of her way,
But some narrowly escape
a chrome communion as
the fiery revelation roars past.

Betty’s withered arm rests
out from the window,
and a finger or two slides across
the glossy paint, producing
A fantasy, the smooth hot body of the Ford
sanitizing her from wickedness.

The Poets of Hamilton County Jail

ANDRÉANA LEFTON

The gate slams shut behind us. We walk down a gray corridor, toward an elevator with flat gray walls. There are no buttons, just an electric eye, watching us. Slowly we ascend to the fourth floor of Hamilton County Jail, in downtown Chattanooga. My two fellow teachers share fragments of their day as I take in my surroundings.

It's my first time in a maximum security jail, where over 500 men are kept for sentencing before being transferred to state prison or released. We exit the elevator, waiting for a guard to open the classroom – another gray, concrete room, with gray tables and plastic chairs.

Twelve men filter in, floor by floor. Most are dressed in orange jumpsuits. Others are in red. We shake hands with every man who walks in. Their wrists are shackled. So are their feet.

I try to "act natural" – which only makes me more self-conscious. I'm a young woman after all, and don't want to draw unnecessary attention to myself. Thankfully, there's Kris, the seasoned lead teacher, who confidently takes charge. Hailey and I slip easily into the role of her assistants, taking seats beside the men at the U-shaped table.

We read the mission statement, crafted by the women of Bradley County Jail with Dr. Victoria Bryan, the founder and director of Turn the Page. This program brings creative writing and critical literacy skills to men and women who are imprisoned and in recovery in Tennessee. "In this classroom, we read, write, talk, and listen. We speak, but we don't interrupt. We offer support, and not judgment. We are here to critique our writing, not each other's pasts."

The program, sponsored by the Southern Literary Alliance, fills a needed void. While there are a number of prison writing programs across the U.S., workshops for men and women in jails are more unusual. This is because jail is considered a transitory space, a holding pen as people await sentencing. Yet this waiting period can last several years.

We are a nation of inmates. Over 2 million people in the U.S. are behind bars. One in every 37 American adults is under some form of correctional supervision, according to the NAACP. Add to this other forms of imprisonment: self-harm, addiction, abuse, mental illness. Trafficking and sexual enslavement. No one is untouched by mass incarceration

One by one, we introduce ourselves. The guys seem curious about us, but not rude. I stop worrying about my demeanor, and open my ears.

The men at Hamilton County Jail write poetry. Their words are close to the bone, close to the unspeakable soul. Each man has a music all his own. Rap pours out of the younger men, streams of urgent rhyme about violence ingested and multiplied into a living nightmare. Some of the older men have gravitas and undeniable wisdom. Andre*, a gentle gray-haired man, begins the story of his life with these haunting words:

Let me tell you a story
about a lil' boy growing up
in a lost world...

Students share insights gained after first-time or repeat offenses, months in "the hole" (solitary confinement), and months or years in a cage with eight other men. They want to understand: How did I get here? What happened to me and what am I responsible for? Eugene explored these questions in a letter to his ancestors. As a Black man, he made the connection between his own shackles, and the chains of his slave forefathers:

You were forced to do things against your
will and were even killed along the way. You
sacrificed your own lives to protect and make
life better for the ones who came after you...

Eugene expressed deep pain and contrition for putting "the chains and shackles back on." But he also sees the trap of poverty, drugs, and life on "the streets":

Because it seems like nobody else
is concerned about how
the "Streets" is kidnapping our kids,
raising them up,
then sending them back home
for us to bury them.

Another student, Manuel,* traced the generational effects of trauma. His father is a paraplegic, caused by a car accident when Manuel was only five. This man projected his rage and helplessness onto his young son. Manuel wrote in his father's voice:

I know there is no use...So instead of hope,
I feed my eldest son verbal abuse...

He don't give up though, win or lose...my son
says to me one day
"I'll always be there Dad, but you'll have to
choose"...

Then I make a decision to change my life...And
do my best
to provide for two boys without a wife.

One night, Eugene shared a supplication he'd written – from an unborn child to his drug-addicted mother: *I guess you ain't listening, I guess I'll keep kicking you until I get your undivided attention.*

God, haven't we all felt that way sometimes? Felt like kicking ourselves, our parents, and the whole damned world until our voice is heard?

Going to jail every week is full of rawness and contradiction. Eugene, whose smooth skin belies his forty-some years, tells me about a child that he and his ex-girlfriend helped raise. He shows me photos of a bright-faced little girl, dark hair combed into two pom-poms. She's paralyzed from the waist down – a victim of gun violence and gang warfare.

And yet, there is a strong current of positive energy that flows through every class. For an hour and a half most Thursday nights, the bars dissolve, and we laugh, shed a few tears, show our real faces and scars. Despite the level of emotional honesty we've established over time, I was still amazed by this poem by Ron, who has a chiseled face and deep-set eyes:

Ok

As a child it was ok to watch cartoons and eat peanut butter crackers.
During Halloween, it was ok to dress up as the action figure hero
and pick through a bag full of candy.
To catch bumblebees in a jar without getting stung.
To toss a football in the yard with my dad.
It was also ok to pick the plums off my granny's tree, even though I never ate any.
It wasn't ok that I had to experience sex abuse at the age of ten.
It wasn't ok that I was coerced to have sex with my babysitter; she was eighteen.
It wasn't ok that I kept it a secret. My mother never knew.

Making honor roll and the dean's list were ok. Being a football star was ok.
I was the jock on campus, but I really wasn't ok within myself.
It wasn't ok that I sold drugs, that I hung out with gang members
who stole and robbed innocent people.
Peer pressure got the best of me, that wasn't ok.
Cancer took its toll on me, I ended up ok.
It was never ok that I sexually assaulted a young lady.
Sometimes I consider myself ______?_______
and not sure if I'm going to be ok.

After the very first class, I headed to Miller Park, an oval of green surrounded by city life. I lay with my back against the earth, wishing I could transmit the cool grass and black sky to my students. We had just read Langston Hughes and Rumi: *We have fallen into the place where everything is music.* Against my stomach was pressed a poem I'd written, sitting next to Andre, a few minutes before:

Jailbreak

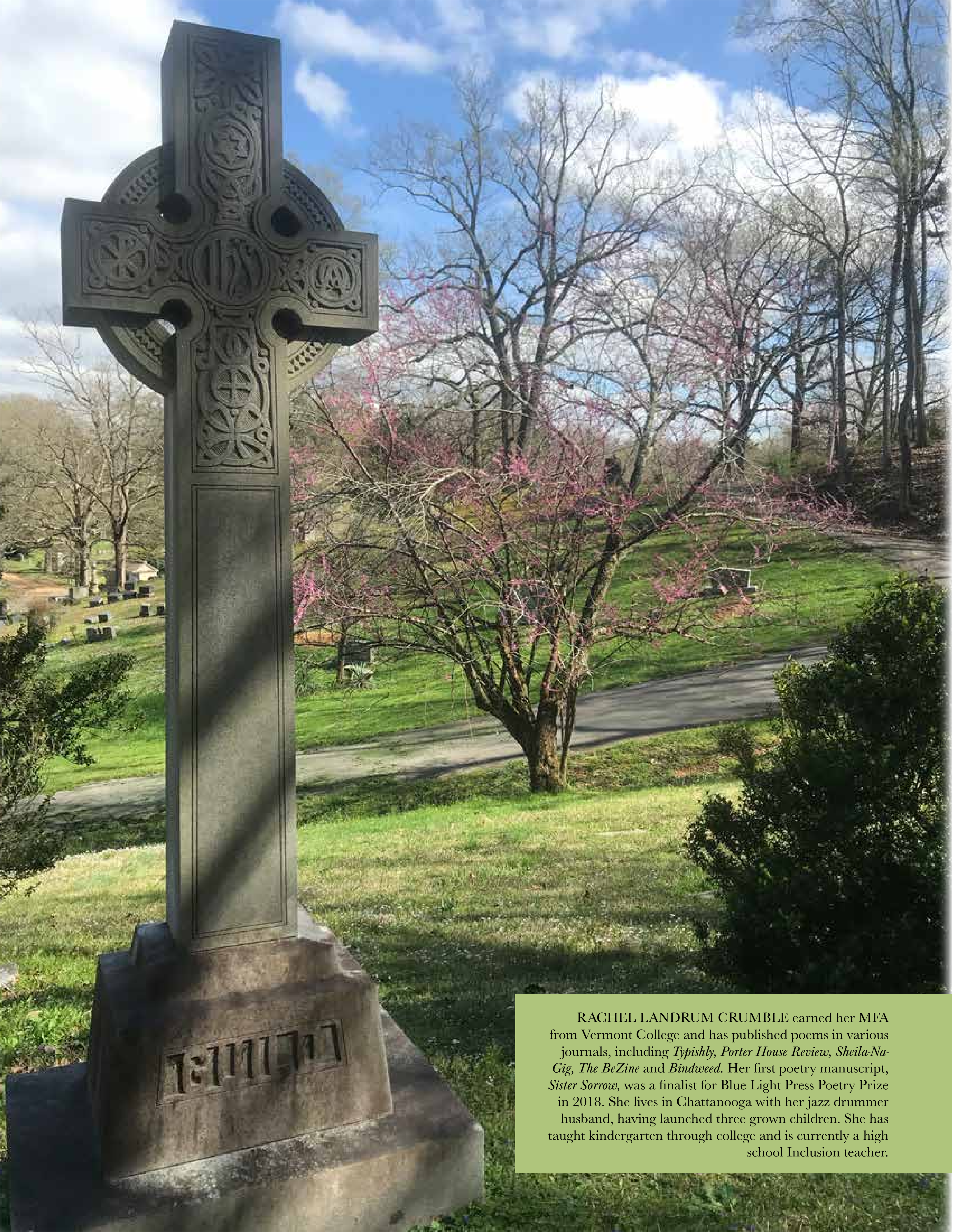
We have fallen into the place
where everything is music
where everything pierces and shimmers
with a thousand glittering edges
and eyes, teeth of flame
and leaves of light.

We have fallen
and sometimes it feels
like we'll never get back up
never feel the rough tongue
of grass beneath our feet
never know the blessed voice
that sings in our minds and binds
these wounds that cry
in the dead of night.

We have fallen into this place
where death is close
but salvation is closer.
Close your eyes.
Let the ghosts dance free
and let your own sweet breath
tremble
and ignite.

ANDRÉANA (AE) LEFTON is a poet, freelance writer, and educator, currently based in Chattanooga. With degrees from American University and the London School of Economics, she has lived and worked across the U.S., and in Europe, the U.K. and Middle East. She collaborates with entrepreneurs, non-profit leaders, artists and educators to open new pathways for unheard lives and the inner work of social justice. She is also an instructor with Turn the Page, a non-profit that brings creative writing to people in jail and in recovery.

* *Names marked with asterisks are pseudonyms*



RACHEL LANDRUM CRUMBLE earned her MFA from Vermont College and has published poems in various journals, including *Typishly, Porter House Review, Sheila-Na-Gig, The BeZine* and *Bindweed*. Her first poetry manuscript, *Sister Sorrow,* was a finalist for Blue Light Press Poetry Prize in 2018. She lives in Chattanooga with her jazz drummer husband, having launched three grown children. She has taught kindergarten through college and is currently a high school Inclusion teacher.

Photo by Rachel Landrum Crumble

Walking in Forest Hills Cemetery

Rachel Landrum Crumble

> *"The world reveals itself to those who travel on foot."*
> –Werner Herzog

I come to make amends
for the broken promises
I've made to my body,
to feel with each step the heaviness
of flesh, the lightness of spirit.

I come to keep faith
with the natural world.
On the lawn, a long stem variety
of bright yellow dandelions
lights up the tombstones
like birthday candles.
Mammoth magnolias bloom
with white flowers big as baby heads.
I see the fox, the coyote
like shadows moving under cloud cover
in my peripheral vision.

I come to lay mimosa and honeysuckle
on the headstone of all my far-flung griefs:
my college roommate, gone
from cancer last month in Maine.
My sister, cousin, and friend
taken by cancer in their 40s.
Neighbors, church members buried here.
My mother's ashes buried in a pink
marble urn, too far to visit.
My father's, scattered along the beach
three Junes ago.

I come to read the dates and names, histories
hazarded before my birth. Here I remember,
since I take nothing for the journey,
I will lay it all down again. Here I remember
I am a descendant of Vikings, horse thieves,
slave holders and Quaker Abolitionists.
Like them, like these, winter bulbs
planted hopefully in family gardens,
I await a new season—
recalling my journey
to a kingdom not made with hands.

I Go Back to Mulberry

KAT FINNEY

Debbie and Charles live in the backwoods of Arkansas. To reach them from the city is a journey along many winding roads, passing roaming cattle or a gaggle of ducks over mini bridges. Single lane roads traverse the stretches of barren land. If you drive a nicer car, say, a four-door Nissan, the country boys will stare down curiously from their tall trucks as they pass by. Reaching a certain spot, the roads dissolve into gravel and the bumps and dips of the drive shoot pebbles at the windows. The wide, open fields clutter with trees. Shade swallows the car whole.

On one side of the gravel road is a metal pavilion for their cars; maybe two or three sit idly at a time. On the other side of the road lies a rustic old barn. Tarnished tools litter the ground, misplaced odds and ends sit out in view, and a clearing opens. Subtle burn marks, remnants of last 4th of July, remain on the grass. The line of trees is so thick at the edge it may as well be a brick wall. A large circular target stands near the trees, ripped with holes the size of quarters. The gunpowder in the air mixes with a memory of fire and a kiss of onion grass.

Their home is at the heart of the cubbyhole in the woods. While the barn is dirty and rusted like the 40-year-old cans stacked in the corner, the trailer is clean and seems decorated by someone reading home renovation magazines from the 80s. Ceramic frogs and various stuffed animals fill their porch and window sills. Debbie covers the outdoor stairs with matted, beige carpet; the thought of walking up it is sickening to the stomach. At the top of the landing, my heart sinks. The glass storm door is the only thing separating us from them. With a clear view out the front door, Debbie is already beginning to stand. "Mah babies, mah babies!" she coos loudly, flailing her arms about the air.

She flings the door open with a squeal and motions us in. The smell of their ashtrays hits my nose, the dust of cigarette butts choking my lungs. My father has me enter the house first, a silent watchman behind me. Charles is watching TV when we come in and he stands to hug me, his gray head just barely above mine. He pulls away from me, saying, "Hey girl! How are ya? Ya were jus this tall last time I saul ya. Ten years old and already my size. Chuck, why don't ya come over more often? I got a new buckshot for ya to try wit me. We can go test her out today if ya wanna." Sheepishly, my father gives him a quick hug, before going back to his transparent state behind me.

"Give me some shuga," Debbie says and pulls me in tightly, kissing me full on the lips. Her black hair is in a poodle-esque perm. She holds me at arm's reach, looking over my frame with a nosy smile. Her focus stalls at my midsection, a scrutinizing glint on the tightness of my clothes. She turns to my father, who stands just out of her reach and watches the back of my head until his stepmother eventually turns away.

Debbie begins her tour of the trailer for me. Everything remains the same as it had been the summer before. We stop by the guest room and my nerves jump. I have never liked it there. I think of it only as the "Doll Room." Dolls line every corner, miniature and life-size alike. Glass faces, shining eyes, piercing but empty glares, frilly clothes, gargantuan hats, painted tears running down porcelain cheeks, blue eyeshadow, flawless skin, perfectly curled locks of plastic strands.

They watch me, a feeling I can never get rid of. Debbie calls it "Summer's room."

On a visit a few years back, I had asked about Summer. There was a picture of her taped to the glassware cupboard. It was of a woman about my mom's age. I pointed to it, and asked, "Who is this?"

"Hunny, thas my daughter." I took a second look at the picture. Her hair curled and darkened like Debbie's, but her smile was warmer and her face was rosier, happier. The woman's eyes stared out of frame, focused on something I couldn't see. Debbie paused, unsure, before she cursed and said, "Hell, yure old enough to understand now. She's gone, shuga." Debbie's voice didn't waver, "She's sick for a very long time. She had the cancer, ya know, in her head. Thas her room ova there." She nodded toward the Doll Room.

"I'm sorry," I said, "How old was she?"

"She'd just turned 32," she locked eyes with me. "She liked dolls. I put more of em in there when she passed. If I see one at the store that looks like her, I buy it. Makes it feel like my girl is still home." For a moment, Debbie faltered, like she had remembered something mid sentence. It stopped her cold.

After that, she didn't want to talk about Summer anymore.

There's a bed in the Doll Room. No one sleeps there though. I can't imagine having to spend a night in that room, with my overnight bag stashed behind the door and my sleepless body tucked into the crisp sheets. The shelves would be lined wall-to-wall with those human imitations who would watch me sleep like guards in the dark. The colonial doll, taller than myself, is positioned perfectly on the rocking chair across from me, dust settling over her high collar clothes. She has brown, glass eyes and long lower eyelashes, making her eyes droop sadly, with no undereye bags to speak of. She has thick angular eyebrows, and long, glossy brown hair that cascades down her shoulders, evenly sectioned on either side of her face. Her pillowy lips are shadowed on her perfect face, though lopsided and the wrong color for her skin. The longer she'd watch me, the more I'd see a reflection of myself seated in that rocking chair. Her skin would become less plastic and more flesh-like, and for a moment it would seem like her eyes will move. If I should close my eyes for a second, I fear she would lunge at me, her mouth stretching open to reveal a cavity that could swallow me whole, trapping me inside the shell of a frozen doll. I fear once I fall asleep in that room, I will never come out again. When Debbie asks if I want to stay the night—and she always tries—I make an excuse to go back to my father's house. I can't stand to be there. There's a ghost in that room, I just know it.

Once the tour finishes, Charles returns to his armchair, waiting for us to sit by him. Tentatively, I sit in the middle of the couch. My father follows to sit beside me, his knees facing away from the rest of us. He doesn't attempt to speak. Silence sits over us all.

“You want somthin to eat, shuga?” Debbie stumbles off away from us into the kitchen, cursing at her bum ankle. My father doesn't say a word. He just glances at me, nudging my arm to follow Debbie, who carries on her own one-way conversation. I take light footsteps on the carpet, realize I'm still wearing shoes, and quickly bend down to throw them by the door. If she catches me wearing shoes on the carpet again, she'll tear me a new one, just like last time. When I get into the kitchen, she's already making plates of pulled pork drenched in watery sauce and potato wedges slathered in either cheese or gravy, I can't tell the difference.

“How's the stay with your Dad been? You havin faun out here?” she asks.

For a moment, I stumble, “It's fine, fun. Um. He's working a lot though, so I'm mostly just at the house. Mom just sent me some of my books from home, so I have something to do.” Debbie's facing away from me now, but I see her shoulders rise with a quick huff escaping her lips. She shakes her head, huffing once more. I shouldn't have brought up my mother.

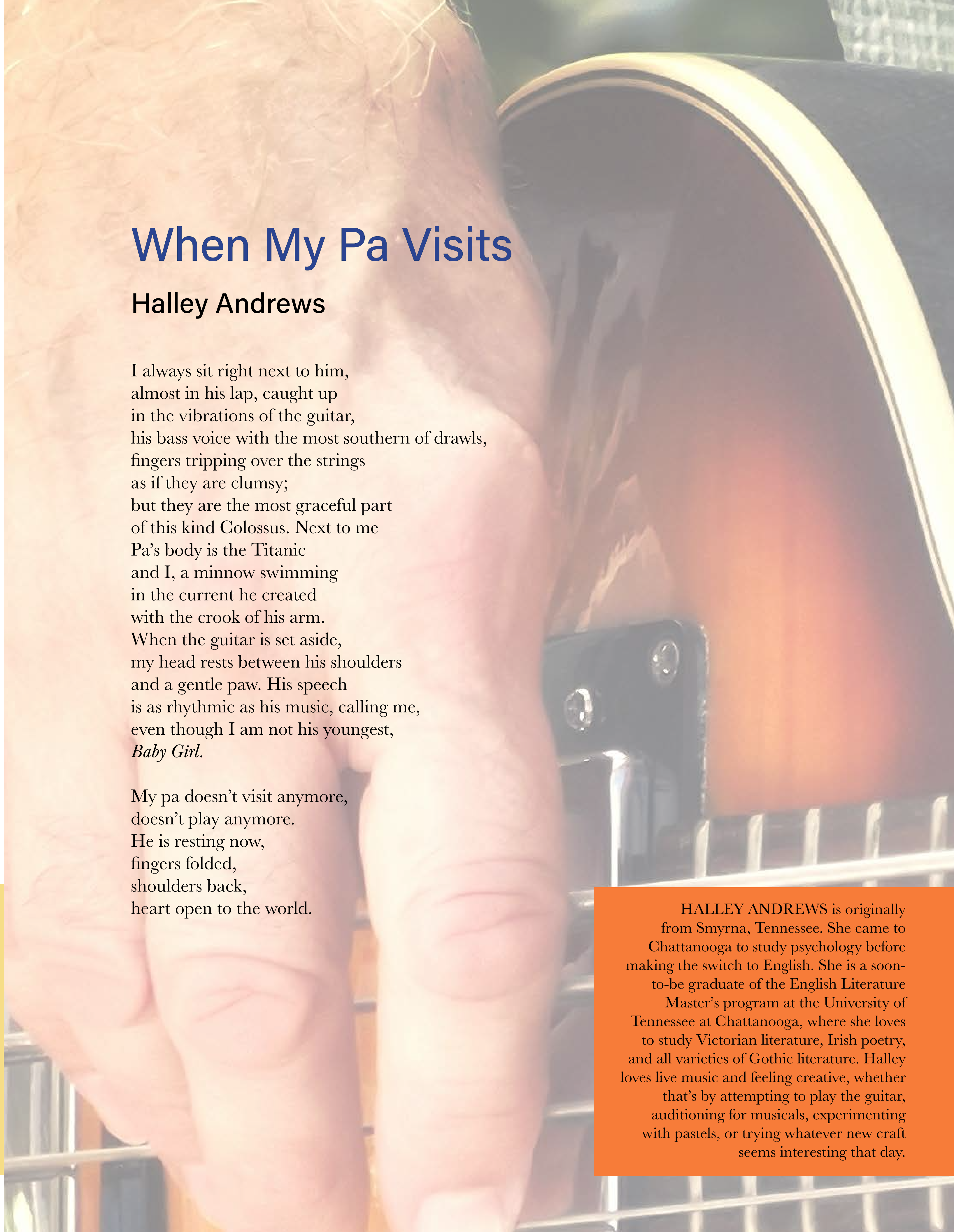
She changes the subject quickly. “Well, if you get bored ova there, give me a holla and I'll pick you up for the day. We can go shoppin for clothes, the ones yous wearin are too small anyways. You eat just like yure daddy.” She hands me two plates and teeters away back to the living room. The thought of food makes my stomach turn, but I carry the plates back to where they sit. My father doesn't look at me when I give him the plate, just picking off bits of pork while watching the television. The news is on and Charles begins to bleat and curse to my father about the president. As they go back and forth, agreeing with each other, their conversation slowly becomes louder. They don't look to me for my opinion. Why would they want my opinion? Me, the granddaughter they've hardly seen since the divorce, the one from the flashy neighborhood in the city, the one whose Momma thinks she's better than everyone else?

> “They don't look to me for my opinion. Why would they want my opinion? **Me, the grandaughter they've hardly seen since the divorce,** the one from the flashy neighborhood in the city, the one whose Momma thinks she's better than everyone else?

The sun sets below the horizon as the hours pass by, and soon the room is filled with the bright fluorescence from the television screen. The harsh lines of my father's deadpan face make him seem twice his thirty years. His eyes follow the screen loosely. He's clicking his heels and glancing at his watch every so often, sighing lightly as he looks back. No one speaks for a long time. The air settles over them like dust.

Suddenly, my father stands, breaking the calm. “We've got to go. I have work in the morning.” He gives a blank stare that tells me to get up. Everyone moves to the door to say goodbyes as I'm putting on my shoes, and as soon as I'm up again, he's pulling me out the door and down the steps. The grandparents wave as we climb into the car. He doesn't wave back. As we begin driving away, I can't see their expressions in the darkness. Still, I know they're talking about me, the granddaughter they still don't understand. They're wondering how tall I will be when they see me next year, what else my father will have to say about the divorce, why I have to be so damn much like my mother.

KAT FINNEY is a student from a slow-growing city in Tennessee called Mount Juliet. She admires her backwoods roots and uses elements from her life, from dialect to scenery, to create remembrances of one's childhood. A reader from day one, she is constantly inspired by authors who tackle the kinds of issues she delves into, such as family struggles, women's issues, and queer/gender identities. Currently, she lives in Chattanooga, where she continues writing short essays and stories on the coming of age and the effects of family.



When My Pa Visits

Halley Andrews

I always sit right next to him,
almost in his lap, caught up
in the vibrations of the guitar,
his bass voice with the most southern of drawls,
fingers tripping over the strings
as if they are clumsy;
but they are the most graceful part
of this kind Colossus. Next to me
Pa's body is the Titanic
and I, a minnow swimming
in the current he created
with the crook of his arm.
When the guitar is set aside,
my head rests between his shoulders
and a gentle paw. His speech
is as rhythmic as his music, calling me,
even though I am not his youngest,
Baby Girl.

My pa doesn't visit anymore,
doesn't play anymore.
He is resting now,
fingers folded,
shoulders back,
heart open to the world.

HALLEY ANDREWS is originally from Smyrna, Tennessee. She came to Chattanooga to study psychology before making the switch to English. She is a soon-to-be graduate of the English Literature Master's program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where she loves to study Victorian literature, Irish poetry, and all varieties of Gothic literature. Halley loves live music and feeling creative, whether that's by attempting to play the guitar, auditioning for musicals, experimenting with pastels, or trying whatever new craft seems interesting that day.

NEW SOUTHERN TRADITIONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEJANDRA LARA

> “Hispanic food **has become a staple** of Southern communities.

SHARA TROUTNER

Food, the ambassador of all cultures, crosses lines where mapmakers draw barriers. Hispanic culture has given the South much needed flavor and a new appreciation for a culture thousands of miles from home. Once a novelty, Hispanic food has become a staple of Southern communities and is changing people’s perceptions on cross-cultural experiences.

When I first encountered tamales, I wasn’t sure what to do with them. How did anyone even eat a tamale when it’s covered in a corn husk? Do you eat the corn husk? Do you not eat the corn husk? They were so foreign from anything I ate growing up that I didn’t even try them for several years. Finally, my Mexican-American students convinced me that I must give them a shot. They said tamales were a beloved tradition served in their homes every Christmas Eve. They also instructed me on how to eat them (you don’t eat the corn husk).

When I finally stepped out of my comfort zone to try tamales, I was amazed at every savory, soft inner bite. Inside that tender corn husk, I found steaming, spicy, shredded chicken and masa, cooked with a seasoning I’d never seen in the aisles of Publix. I tried the pork tamale, and it was just as excellent. Many enjoy cheese tamales, though I’ve never had them, having instantly preferred the spicy chicken to any other variation. Mexican tamales quickly became a favorite in my home, and so I adopted the tradition of serving them on Christmas Eve to my own family.

The best tamales I’ve ever eaten, though, come from the kitchen of Alejandra Lara, a resident of Cleveland, Tennessee. This infusion of Mexican culture into my own Southern home made me want to reach out to Alejandra to learn more about her.

The following is a conversation we had about Alejandra’s journey to the U.S. and her dedication to her family. Because Alejandra speaks little English, this interview was conducted via Messenger with help from Google Translate. Some Spanish has been retained to share the flavor of the interaction.

Shara Troutner: Tell me how long you’ve lived in the Southeastern U.S. and where you lived originally.

Alejandra Lara: I have lived 4 years in the United States Originally, I’m from Soto la Marina in Tamaulipas, Mexico. I grew up there. At 17, I decided to come to the United States because of the insecurity and danger that exists in Mexico. Deaths after deaths. We decided to come to the United States legally, and thank God we are here.

ST: Can I ask you what kinds of deaths?

AL: Deaths of organized crime. That is a part of everyday life today in Mexico. Deaths of innocent people after the war there.

ST: I’m very sorry to hear that.

AL: Unfortunately, this is how people live in Mexico, even today.

ST: Tell me what you do on a typical day here in Cleveland.

AL: I dedicate myself to my family and my children, in caring for and educating them.

ST: Do you teach your own children at home?

AL: Yes. My 4-year-old son is in kindergarten. He is learning to read and write in both Spanish and English.

ST: How is your day similar or different than where you grew up?

AL: Life is very different here in the United States, without a united family in Mexico.

ST: You’ve shared your amazing tamales with me. How did you learn to cook?

AL: I learned by watching my mom cook. She is a housewife, and for a long time I worked in restaurants in Texas, so I learned there, and I learned from her.

ST: Are tamales traditionally a food served at Christmas in Mexico? One of my students told me that her Mexican American grandmother serves tamales on Christmas Eve every year, and so I’ve adopted that tradition.

AL: Of course. It is a Mexican custom, at Christmas and at any party, it is the most common food. It’s not bound to any particular season. It’s good any time of the year.

ST: Who is your hero and why?

AL: Myself. I have struggled a lot to keep going along with my husband. Mi esposo y yo nos casamos en Estados Unidos, tanto como su familia y mi familia tivimos sacrificios para obtener la visa legar y poder entrar a Estados Unidos.

ST: I love that you consider yourself your own hero. What is one thing you tell yourself to get through challenging times?

AL: El tiempo de Dios es perfecto. God’s timing is perfect.

ST: What has been the biggest gift in being in the US?

AL: My life. And that of my family.

ST: What would you like people to know about living in the United States that people born here can take for granted?

AL: That every human being is equal. There are many racist people who don’t understand that God made every human being equal.

ST: What do you hope your children will take from living in the U.S.?

AL: A good education.

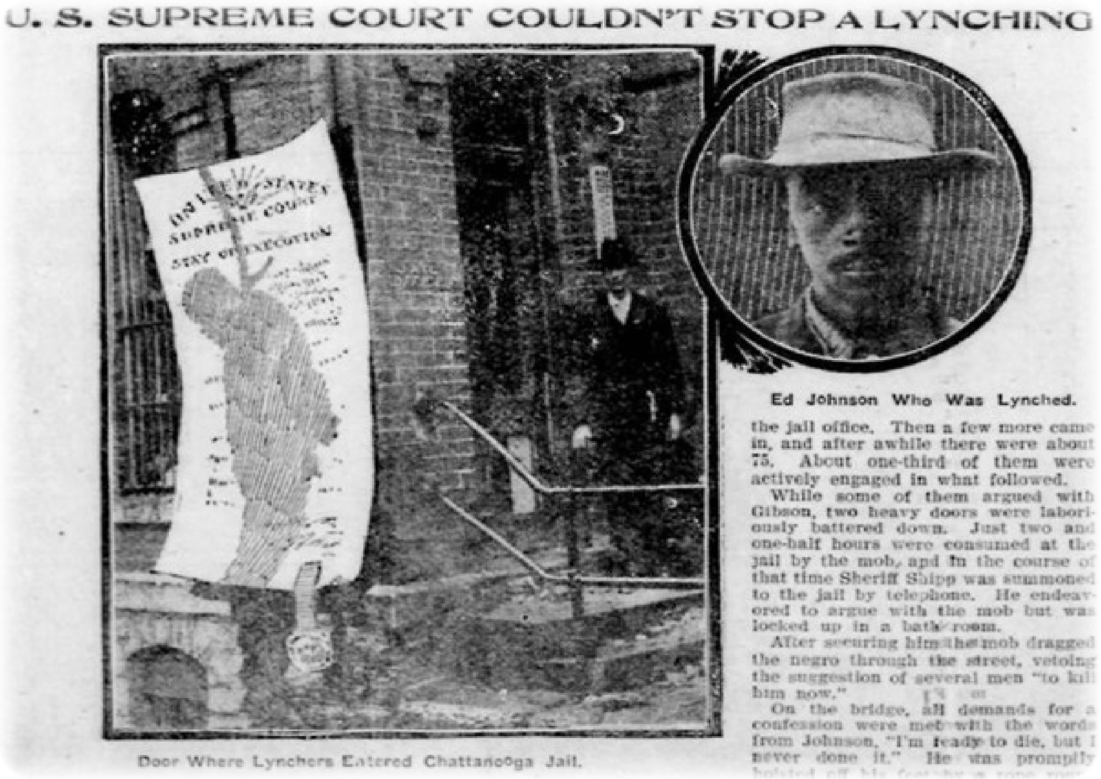
ST: Thank you for taking time to talk to me.

AL: Muchas gracias. Dios te bendiga.

SHARA TROUTNER is a literature and writing teacher at North Murray High School in Chatsworth, Georgia. She is also an emerging writer and graduate student in the MA Creative Writing program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She received her English BA from Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, where she resides with her husband, children, and two dogs.

The Intentional Omission

Ed Johnson and the Walnut Street Bridge



U. S. SUPREME COURT COULDN'T STOP A LYNCHING

UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT STAY OF EXECUTION

Door Where Lynchers Entered Chattanooga Jail.

Ed Johnson Who Was Lynched.

the jail office. Then a few more cam in, and after awhile there were abou 75. About one-third of them wer actively engaged in what followed.

While some of them argued wit Gibson, two heavy doors were labori-ously battered down. Just two an one-half hours were consumed at th jail by the mob, and in the course o that time Sheriff Shipp was summone to the jail by telephone. He endeav-ored to argue with the mob but wa locked up in a bath-room.

After securing him the mob dragge the negro through the street, vetoin the suggestion of several men "to ki him now."

On the bridge, all demands for a confession were met with the word from Johnson, "I'm ready to die, but I never done it." He was promptl

A photo of Ed Johnson (right) and Hamilton County Jail. The man standing near the jail is not Johnson.
Courtesy of Sam Hall, David Moon and Mariann Martin.

Japorsche Pettaway

When I asked Mariann Martin, Coordinator of The Ed Johnson Project, about websites that provide the history of the Walnut Street Bridge in Chattanooga, she offered her experience.

"I have been on Sheriff Shipp's site. And there was no mention of Ed Johnson!"

That bit of information was surprising. Sheriff Shipp is infamous for not taking action against the mob that lynched Ed Johnson, and was found guilty of contempt of court for his actions by the Supreme Court in 1906. An online search of his name confirmed Martin's claim. The Hamilton County Sheriff's Office website does not mention Shipp's role in Ed Johnson's lynching—or Ed Johnson, for that matter.

Martin used a term that stuck with me throughout our conversation: "intentional omission."

The Walnut Street Bridge is perhaps best known today for being a local landmark and hosting various festivals. Tennessee River Valley Geotourism Map Guide's website describes the bridge as "the oldest non-military highway bridge still in use today, restored and revitalized as a pedestrian bridge and linear park," "a popular spot to simply stroll, relax, and enjoy the natural and urban beauty of Chattanooga," and notes that events such as Wine Over Water, Riverbend, and Oktoberfest often utilize the bridge for festivities. Wine Over Water, one of the most popular activities on the bridge, similarly advertises the bridge's history on its website as "one of the world's longest pedestrian bridges...the first bridge to link Downtown Chattanooga to the North Shore…[and] the first non-military highway bridge to cross the Tennessee River." While these descriptions are technically factual, there is a darker, often omitted past that suggests the bridge is also historic for at least one other thing: lynching. In fact, the bridge is perhaps even more historic due to events that symbolize hatred for black Americans.

Rita Lorraine Hubbard, author of *African Americans of Chattanooga: A History of Unsung Heroes,* paints a different portrait of the history of the bridge. On January 23, 1906, sixteen years after the bridge was built, a white woman named Nevada Taylor was raped near Lookout Mountain. According to Hubbard, someone wrapped a leather strap around Taylor's neck from behind, and she was not able to see the rapist's face before she lost consciousness. When a reward was offered for anyone with information regarding the case, "a white witness quickly came forward" and claimed to see Ed Johnson "in that particular area around the time of the rape." This accusation effectively assured that Ed Johnson's life would never be the same.

Hubbard's research paints a simple but endearing portrait of Ed Johnson. He liked to work with his hands. He apparently had no choice—with only a fourth-grade education, his options were limited. An overview of his life reveals that he was a carpenter, and usually worked in exchange for shelter. When he was accused of raping Taylor, he insisted he did not, and although there was no evidence, he was charged anyway. A mob attempted an uncoordinated and unsuccessful lynching on the day of his arrest, January 25, 1906, but by the time they arrived at the jail, Johnson had been moved to Nashville to await trial without fear of bodily harm.

With Johnson back in Chattanooga, the trial started on February 6, 1906 and lasted three days, with Johnson being convicted and sentenced on February 9, 1906. Hubbard notes that Johnson was "quickly tried by the all-white jury, and was convicted and sentenced to death." The electronic version of United States v. Shipp found on Cornell Law School's Legal Information Institute website indicates that Johnson's basis for petitioning for a writ of habeas corpus (meaning he wanted the court to determine if his imprisonment was lawful) included blacks being kept off the jury and his counsel being "deterred" from highlighting such an issue due to possible intimidation by mobs. The petition was denied on March 10, but a successful appeal by Johnson's lawyer Noah Parden on March 19 ordered that "all proceedings against the appellant be stayed." Parden became the first African American attorney to argue for and subsequently be granted a stay of execution, but that momentous occasion was spoiled. During the night of that same day, March 19, 1906, according to Hubbard, a white mob "dragged Johnson out, beat him, marched him to Walnut Street Bridge and hanged him. The lynching was a brutal one, because Johnson did not die right away. The men eventually opened fire on him."

> "A darker, often omitted past **suggests the bridge is also historic** for at least one other thing: lynching.

It's disheartening that Johnson never saw the day where he could possibly clear his name. It is widely believed that Sheriff Shipp knew of the plan to lynch Johnson but did nothing about it. Both Hubbard and documents from Shipp's trial indicate that he reportedly waited in the restroom and pretended to be busy while the mob dragged Johnson from the jail. A 2018 article by Rosana Hughes in the Chattanooga Times Free Press notes that a book titled *Contempt of Court* indicates some of Shipp's deputies are believed to have participated in the lynching.

During our conversation, Martin noted that there are those who oppose the effort to memorialize Johnson, likely on the grounds of dredging up the city's "dark" history. While Martin acknowledged that there will always be some degree of opposition, she also stressed the importance of "honest, truthful history" and "learning from the past."

"There are some, a few, who see it as negative, you know, there's always that," Martin said.

In a 2018 article written for *Smithsonian Magazine*, Julissa Treviño outlines Ed Johnson's story, noting that in 2000 Johnson's conviction was overturned. Douglas A. Meyers, the Chattanooga judge who overturned the conviction, alluded to the eagerness of whites at the time to pin the rape on any black man. "Something I don't believe the white community really understands is that, especially at that time, the object was to bring in a black body, not necessarily the person who had committed the crime," Treviño quotes him as saying.

For more than a century, there was no face to the name Ed Johnson. Hughes points out that many of the documents were destroyed to protect those who colluded with the mob. Additionally, Tennessee newspapers were often run by white men who typically refrained from

Photo by Emily Livengood Branch

publishing pictures of African Americans. But on March 19, 2018, exactly 112 years after the lynching, a photo was recovered by an attorney conducting research on Johnson's Supreme Court case. It took a century for someone to find it, but there is now a face to the name and story of Ed Johnson. This photo was uncovered by Sam Hall, David Moon and Mariann Martin and appears in Hughes' *Chattanooga Times Free Press* article.

It is also important to note that Johnson was the second man to be lynched on the bridge; Alfred Blount was the first. His case is strikingly similar to Ed Johnson's. In 1893, Blount was also abducted from his jail cell and lynched. Lynching on the Walnut Street Bridge was not a one-time event, and for a period of time, the bridge was a key location for lynchings in Hamilton County. The Ed Johnson Project website states that "Johnson and Blount were two of the approximately 4,000 African Americans who were lynched from Reconstruction to the civil rights era." To honor this history, there are some who believe that the Walnut Street Bridge should be renamed after Johnson.

> "For more than a century, there was no face to the name Ed Johnson. **Many documents were destroyed** to protect those who colluded with the mob.

The Ed Johnson Project leads local efforts to raise awareness about the history of the bridge and reconcile Chattanooga's history of racial injustice. The organization has fully funded plans to memorialize Ed Johnson. During our interview, Martin confirmed that construction for the memorial is set for May 2020. She noted the response from hundreds of donors across Chattanooga, including Hamilton county and the city of Chattanooga, each of which donated $100,000 to the cause.

"It was easier than I thought it would be!" Martin said of the fundraising effort. When asked if the effort to memorialize Ed Johnson and spread awareness about the full history of the bridge would have happened without The Ed Johnson Project, she noted that although there were individual efforts prior to The Ed Johnson Project, an organizational structure is more effective in having a widespread impact. When questioned about any potential reactions when the memorial is finished, she remained optimistic, but also recalled Emmet Till's oft-vandalized memorial (it is usually shot, but a bulletproof version has been erected since the last incident). Martin noted that all measures were being taken to ensure that vandalizing the memorial won't be easy, but if it does happen, the city, which will officially own the memorial once it is complete, has set aside money to repair any damage.

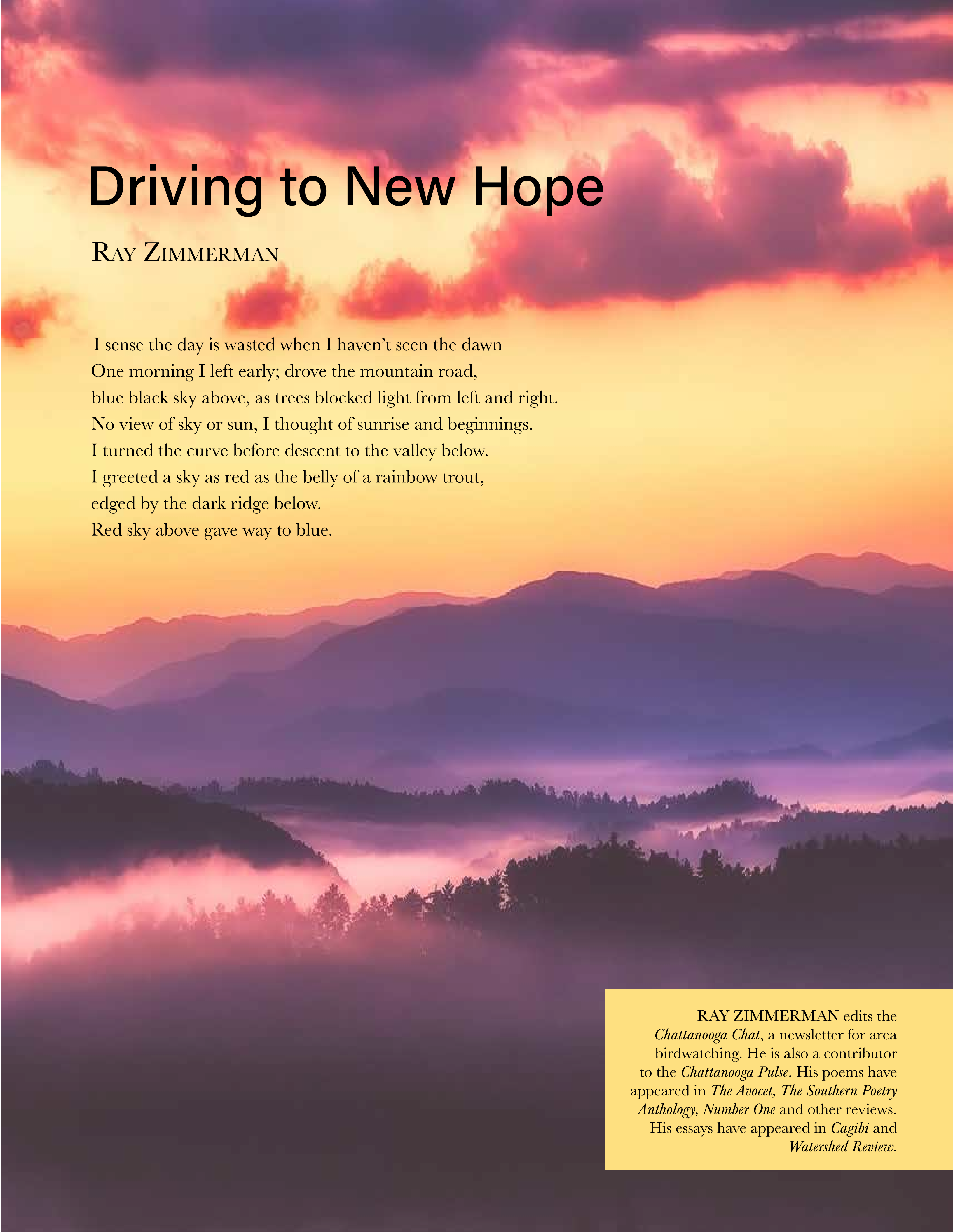
"I think most of the community will welcome it, but we are prepared to prevent vandalism. We have thought of everything to make sure it's durable...even down to breaking one of the fingers [off the memorial]," Martin said.

Other notable efforts to recognize the legacy of Ed Johnson include those by Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer renowned for challenging and highlighting racial injustice. As the Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting racial injustice, Stevenson traveled to Chattanooga to collect soil from the Hamilton County Jail, from where both Johnson and Blount were taken before they were lynched on the bridge. According to Yolanda Putman of the *The Chattanooga Times Free Press,* that soil went to the Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which contains soil from lynching sites across the South in addition to the soil from Chattanooga. Stevenson also spoke at Ed Johnson Community remembrance day, an event held by The Ed Johnson Project. That event ended with a march to the Walnut Street Bridge in remembrance of the men lynched there.

Additionally, in a talk titled "Grace, Justice, and Mercy: An Evening with Bryan Stevenson and Rev. Tim Keller" that can be found on YouTube, Stevenson expressed his frustrations and concerns with racial injustice in America and selective omissions. "If I read the 13th amendment, it doesn't talk about the ideology of white supremacy, it doesn't talk about narratives of racial differences—it only talks about involuntary servitude and forced labor. And that's why I believe slavery didn't end in 1865. It just evolved. It turned into decades of terrorism and lynching and violence. We suffered through terrorism in this country. We pulled black people out of their homes and we hanged them and we mutilated them and we burned them alive and we created this era of terror." During the talk, he also lamented the "celebratory" nature of civil rights education. "It sounds like a three-day carnival...That's not our history. Our history is that for decades in this country, we beat and burdened and excluded people of color. We did terrible things."

While some organizations and websites opt to omit the lynchings that took place on the bridge, The Ed Johnson Project, Stevenson, and those who advocate for the bridge to be named after Ed Johnson clearly want to make sure that his name and story are not omitted any longer. They are all advocating for an objective, straightforward history that tells not just the truths we have come to love and recite but also the harsh realities that make us uncomfortable and reflective. For those who might not have known the entire history of the bridge, but who are now learning it, the relevant stories of the black men whose lives were devalued and taken are there, waiting to be heard.

JAPORSCHE PETTAWAY is a graduate student in Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She works as a graduate assistant for the SimCenter: Center of Excellence for Applied Computational Science and Engineering. In her free time, she enjoys baking, studying Spanish, and collecting rocks and minerals.



Driving to New Hope

Ray Zimmerman

I sense the day is wasted when I haven't seen the dawn
One morning I left early; drove the mountain road,
blue black sky above, as trees blocked light from left and right.
No view of sky or sun, I thought of sunrise and beginnings.
I turned the curve before descent to the valley below.
I greeted a sky as red as the belly of a rainbow trout,
edged by the dark ridge below.
Red sky above gave way to blue.

RAY ZIMMERMAN edits the *Chattanooga Chat*, a newsletter for area birdwatching. He is also a contributor to the *Chattanooga Pulse*. His poems have appeared in *The Avocet*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Number One* and other reviews. His essays have appeared in *Cagibi* and *Watershed Review.*

Comfort

BETHANY GRAY

Like many Southerners, I probably have a too intimate relationship with food. Food is both my source of comfort and the root of many of my problems. I eat because I am anxious and I am anxious because I can't stop eating. Food is inescapable and constant and relentless. It is the sweet tint of my best memories and the sour aftertaste of my worst. In every holiday picture, there is a table packed with food in the background. For every death, there has been an abundance of cakes and casseroles.

I've never just eaten. No one in my family has. Food has always been more than sustenance. In fact, it wasn't until my early twenties that I even tilted my head to look at it as such. Until then, it was always solace, avoidance, celebration, punishment. I bought food for the sensual experience it promised, not to replenish my physical body. I cooked for the pleasure and pride it brought me to take a collection of lifeless ingredients and combine them to create something invigorating and exciting, something that would make people close their eyes and hum in unselfconscious pleasure.

My grandparents taught me to cook like that, in their farmhouse kitchen as soon as I was old enough to understand the severity of a blue stovetop flame and reach things in most of the cabinets while standing on a stool. At my mother's house, things were pretty rough, and our cabinets were mostly bare. At the farm, though, there was always flour and baking powder and cinnamon and cocoa and even lard, which I found so gross but couldn't help but jam my little fingers into. And they had all the equipment you could possibly need to cook anything you could think of: mixing bowls of all sizes, wooden spoons, a big rolling pin, an electric mixer, cast iron skillets and meat thermometers and baking dishes. Best of all, there was a ragged homemade "cookbook" with family recipes scrawled onto index cards in my second cousin's long, looping cursive. The first one I tried was "Aunt Glynn's Apple Cake." Aunt Glynn, to me, was Munna, my grandmother.

I remember taking it very seriously. Munna was, after all, a little bit famous for that cake. She'd taken it to family reunions and housewarming parties, church potlucks and baby showers. People always asked her for the recipe, which was quite involved. It wasn't a cake that you could throw together at the last minute. You needed a whole afternoon and a big, plentiful kitchen. Luckily for me, my summers afforded me plenty of time in the most well-stocked kitchen I've ever stepped foot in. I was about 9 years old, and I did the whole thing by myself, with Munna in the living room nearby just in case. I sifted and measured and chopped, checking the recipe after almost every step, acutely aware of the gravity of each one, and then finally slid the tarnished bundt pan into the oven. (I had almost forgotten to preheat it, as this step wasn't listed on the recipe card, but Munna casually reminded me by asking, "I can't remember, is the oven supposed to be at 400 or 425 degrees?")

I knocked that cake out of the park. It was soft and springy and filled the whole house with a sweet and spicy heat. The surface was golden brown and smooth, aside from the corners of the apples that jutted out here and there. My grandmother gave me a toothpick and watched as I slid it into the warm flesh of the cake and then back out, perfectly clean. She beamed at me. When my grandfather came in from the barn a little while later, the cake had cooled just enough to eat and he got the first big slice. I hovered eagerly at his elbow as he dug in and thought I just might pop when he slapped the countertop and said, "Oooh, sis!" after his first bite.

> "I grew into a different type of woman, **one who tries to get a graduate degree while working full time** and trying to manage two kids.

Next, it was cornbread in a cast iron skillet. And then chocolate pie with meringue. And peach cobbler and cinnamon rolls. I made a lot of desserts. Everyone in our family had a sweet tooth, for baked goods in particular. While I cooked, I would fantasize about the slicing and plating and serving to come, the moans and exclamations of my grandparents and my brother and uncle if they happened to be visiting as well. I didn't realize what was happening then, of course. I was learning to love food and also to love with food. It was just happiness and warmth and belonging.

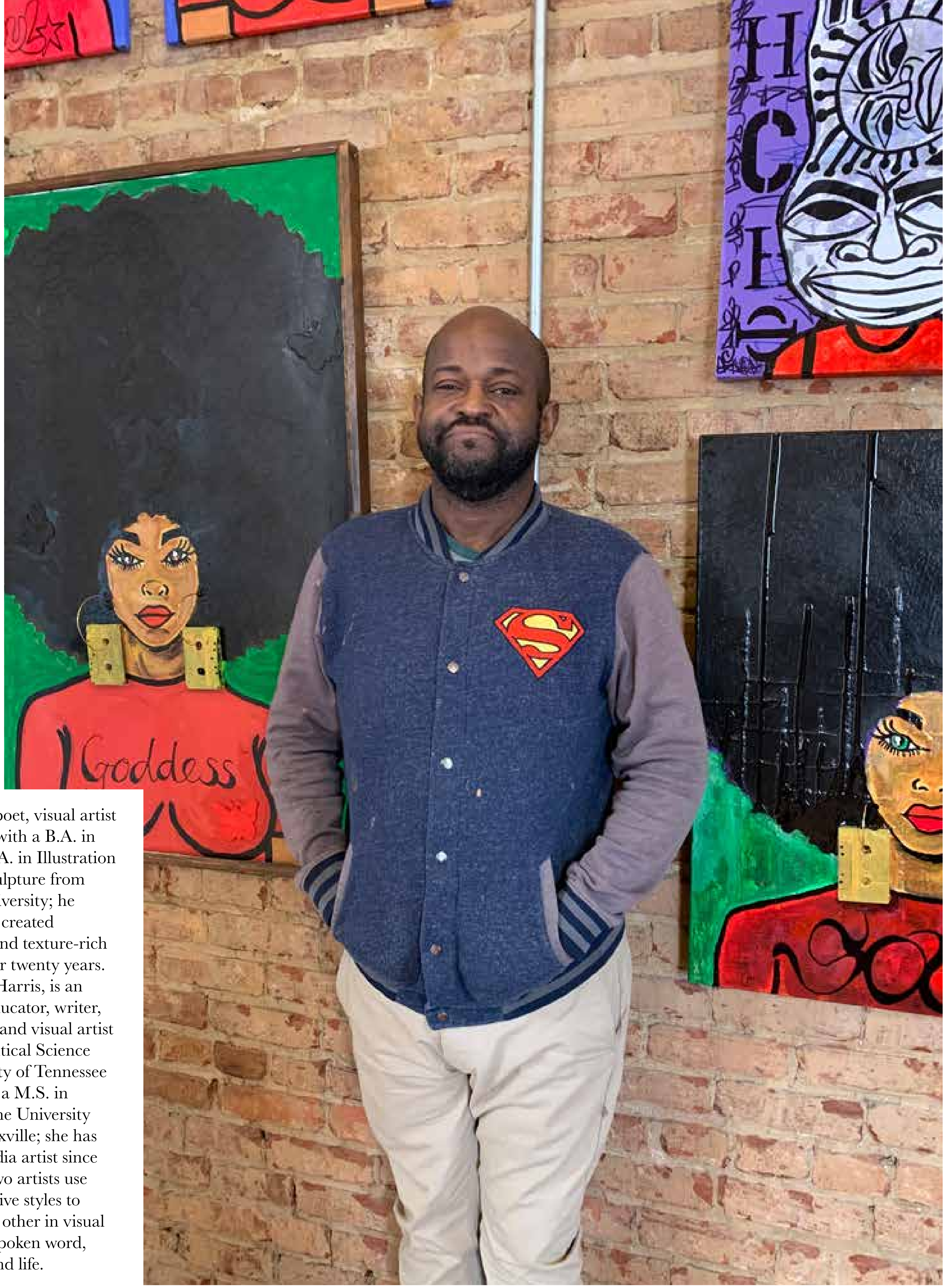
It has been more than 20 years since I cooked with my grandparents in the kitchen. It has been about ten since I really did any regular cooking myself. Somewhere along the way, I just lost touch with those skills. I grew into a different type of woman, one who tries to get a graduate degree while working full time and trying to manage two kids. We eat more frozen pizzas than we should, and neither of my kids could identify asparagus. My life could not be any more different than it was in those years when I stood on a stool in the kitchen and brought food to life, my little hands following the lead of those much bigger and so loving.

But yet…

There is still a tether. On my darkest days, when I feel so overwhelmed by everything, so painfully grown up yet so ill equipped, I still turn first to food to calm the racing of my heart. Convenience foods will do in a pinch, but I am most drawn to pies and cobblers, dishes of dense brownies, cakes with too much frosting. Aside from dessert, there are fried pickles and chicken and dumplings and pasta salad. My mom still cooks some of these things, but other times I go to bakeries and specialty shops when I have a hunger for something specific and indulgent. Sometimes, simply stepping into such a place is enough to lift my spirits. The scents of cinnamon and sugar and yeast, the heat that wraps me up and steals my mind away from whatever it was agonizing over. I've realized over the years that my grandparents did such a wonderful thing when they made those memories with me in the kitchen. They gave me a set of keys—taste and scent, two senses closely tied to memory—to use any time I wanted, long after they were gone, if I ever needed to get back home again.

BETHANY GRAY is a graduate student in Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She is originally from Savannah, Tennessee. She is a single mom of two boys, Liam and Payton. She enjoys reading, watching documentaries, and hiking, and gets probably a little bit too riled up when contestants on Wheel of Fortune buy vowels when there are still plenty of consonants left.

JODY HARRIS



Jody Harris is a poet, visual artist and art historian with a B.A. in Studio Art, a B.F.A. in Illustration and a M.A. in Sculpture from Georgia State University; he has professionally created groundbreaking and texture-rich pieces for well over twenty years. His wife, Keelah Harris, is an award-winning educator, writer, singer/songwriter and visual artist with a B.S. in Political Science from the University of Tennessee Chattanooga and a M.S. in Education from the University of Tennessee Knoxville; she has been a mixed-media artist since childhood. The two artists use their diverse creative styles to complement each other in visual arts as well as in spoken word, singing, writing and life.

Keeody Gallery, 756 E. MLK Jr. Blvd #200 in Chattanooga, Tennessee 37403

Photos by Cynthia Robinson Young

Afro Folk Comes to Chattanooga

An Interview with Jody Harris

Cynthia Robinson Young

Cynthia Robinson Young: Thanks for being willing to do an interview for Catalpa! I'd like to start by asking, how did you become an artist? I was already a fan of your poetry, but then you had an art exhibit at the mayor's office [in Chattanooga]. That's the first time I saw your artwork.

Jody Harris: Well, my maternal grandmother and maternal uncle are both artists. So I grew up watching them. My grandmother did landscape and nature scenes. My uncle did comics and graffiti.

CY: So between those two it was...

JH: Inevitable. Like, somebody's gotta do this. When I was 12, she gave me a book on the Harlem Renaissance, and that was it. I was like "word"! That was it!

My family's from Dalton, Georgia, and at that time, as a person living in Dalton, you either did sports, or you worked in the carpet mill. That's what Dalton is known for...carpets. So I was like, no, I don't want to do that. And I couldn't rely on sports. So I thought, let me try something else...so that's how I got heavy into the Arts.

CY: How old were you when you really felt that the Arts is what you are supposed to do with your life?

JH: Well, my great-uncle had a business and he had a truck, and he paid me $50 to paint our family name on the back of it. And I thought, I can get paid $50 for doing ten minutes of work? I mean, all I did was 10-15 minutes of work but everyone was impressed. I was thinking, huh? Well, I'm going to investigate this some more! So I remember this as my defining moment.

CY: Have you ever seen the work of Faith Ringgold? Because your work reminds me of hers...like folk art. What do you call your work?

JH: I call it "Afro Folk"...except with my twist on it... mixing in graffiti and comic art into the folk aspect of it. Using found objects is a big part of what I incorporate into my work. Now people give me stuff, and I find things at the Goodwill center, at McKays, things that are thrown away, like broken glasses, necklaces from the hair supply store that were bent, jewelry that was broken. I just say, "Hey, I'm an artist. Can I have them?"

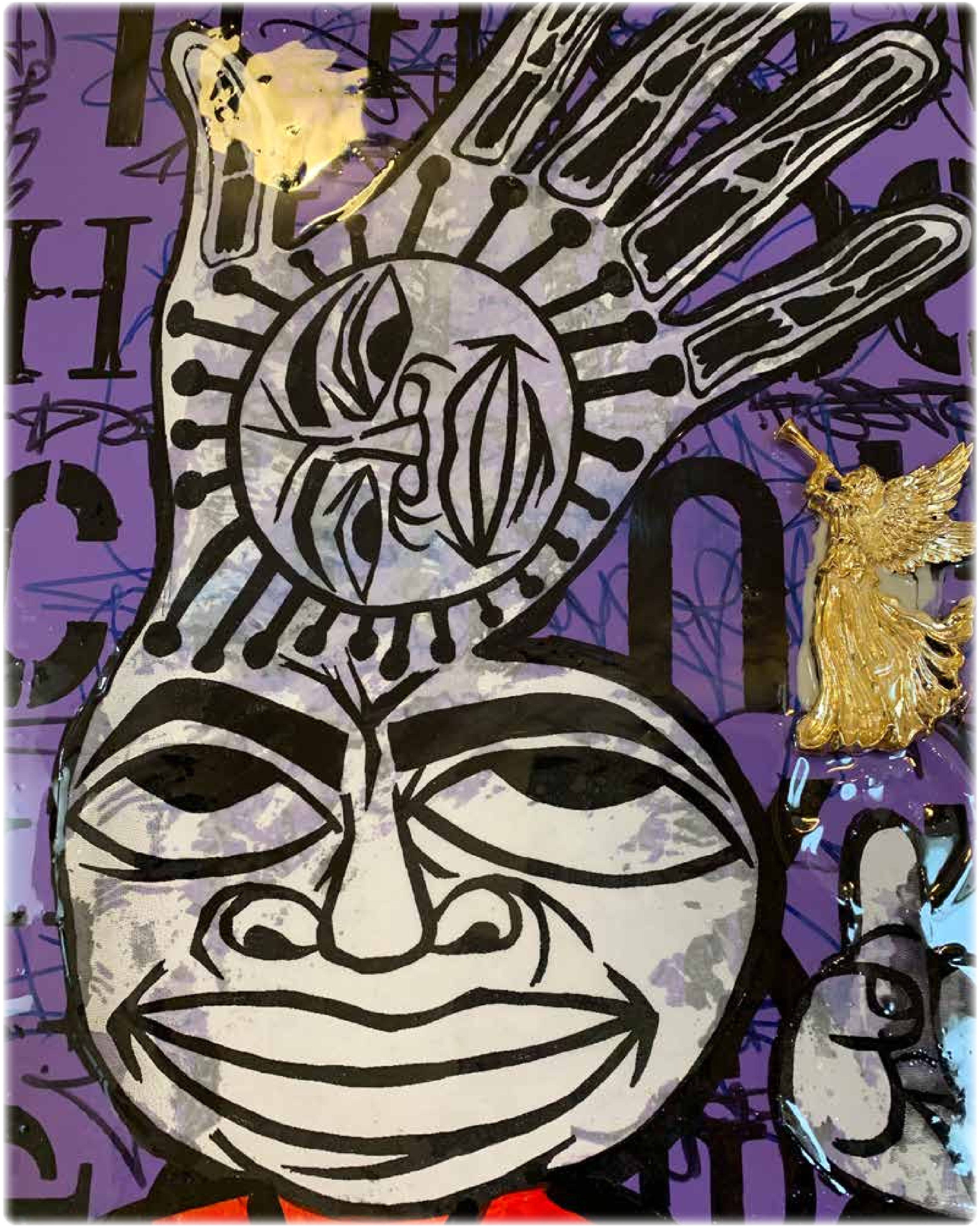
CY: I know that some of your pieces that were on display at Mayor Berke's office are on a television show that's filmed in Atlanta. You want to talk about that? How did that opportunity present itself?

JH: I'm in a few galleries in Atlanta. One of the galleries, called Kaboodle Home Furnishings and Gallery, is in East Atlanta, right there on Flat Shoals and Glenwood. It's owned by a guy named Michael Knight. His gallery sells a lot of vintage furniture that is donated. And of course, with the movie industry in Atlanta being so big, they come to Michael for that kind of stuff.

The staging person for Tyler Perry buys a lot of stuff for his sets from Kaboodle, and he saw my art using vinyl records and said to Michael, "Hey, we got to have them! How much?" So...

CY: Did you say two million dollars? (Laughs)

JH: I didn't believe it at first because when Michael called me, he left a message. And he was like, "Hey, Tyler Perry Studios wants to buy some of your work." My response was, oh, this is an April Fool's joke or whatever... So I ignored it because I've been knowing Michael for six or seven years, and he'll joke like that. So I thought, "Oh, this is one of his jokes," so I didn't respond.



And then he sent me an email. "Hey, Tyler Perry Studios wants to buy some of your work but you've got to sign a release form." Even when they are buying it, you have to release it...basically turning it over to them! So I thought, this is serious! So my work is in his show, Sistas. It's actually in the main character's living room, above the fireplace! I was so excited once I realized...

CY: ... that you're movin' on up!

JH: Yeah! They actually came back and bought more pieces for another show that's coming out in the late spring or summer. So I was excited about that.

TT: Are you finding Chattanooga hospitable as an artist?

JH: On some levels, yeah. When I first started doing music here, back in '87, I had a connection. I would come up here to the Old Cat store that used to be on Brainerd. One of my first DJs actually worked there—a guy named Jeremy Moore. He had an older brother named Fred who was DJ Ruff. Fred would take us to different churches and rec centers around the South to perform, but we would practice here in Chattanooga. So I had a name and a presence here as a musician.

So now, trying to break into the circle as an artist has been different because there's...I don't like to use this word, but cliques. But as far as poetry and music is concerned, it's family. There's always someone reaching out every day saying , "Hey, we're doing this, come to that..."

CY: Hard question: Are you able to get your work into white-owned galleries in Chattanooga? Like on Main Street? Have you tried?

JH: I've tried...

CY: And what happened? Did you need an agent?

JH: I don't think it's necessarily an agent that I need.

I've been in galleries other than in Chattanooga. But what I've been getting from these galleries is, "We're not looking for your type of work right now." But I've worked for everybody, all types of people. So I've never understood that comment. So I said, "I'm showing you five different types of work! What do you mean you're not looking for my type of work right now?"
For that reason, I just gave up on that. I'm still in galleries and shops in other places, like Atlanta and Nashville, so I still feel like I'm representin'!

CY: What's your business model? Do you say, "Alright, this is the month I'm going to work on getting my work out there into other places." Is that what happens?

JH: Yeah, pretty much, to stay visible and get my name out there. It would be concentrating on certain areas. I want to get my work in a certain place because I know a certain crowd comes here, or they have open mics and performances there. My type of work may go good as a backdrop in somebody's recording studio.

That's how I focus on getting stuff in different places. And then it's about rotating too. Like, there's this guy in the West End in Atlanta who wanted toy-themed pieces...

TT: (Points to a piece with toy Transformer toys embedded in it.) I like the Transformer dude.

JH: Yeah, so that's where that's going. Now, the piece with Aretha Franklin. That's actually going to the tribute show. It's going to be the centerpiece for that.

CY: When do you work on your art?

JH: Late at night, like most creative people.

CY: But you're not doing it here, right? Because, well, where's all your paint and all the found objects? It's not here!

JH: Oh, my work space, it's in the back room. My wife and I actually live here. She's an artist too. So we made our own space. And when we have events here, we make a donation to Good Neighbors, the folks who own this building. They have a food pantry and a community kitchen. So they buy food to serve the homeless shelter. When the shelter is stretched for resources, then people can come to Good Neighbors and get meals, baths. So 10% to 15% of all earnings here go towards the food kitchen that goes to the homeless shelter for Good Neighbors, and then we volunteer and serve meals on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

When the Chattanooga galleries said they weren't looking for my type of work, I just gave up on that. I was like, hey, I'm on my own. We need to open up our own. And this is our gallery. My wife's name is Keelah, and then mine is Jody, so we just combined them into Keeody.

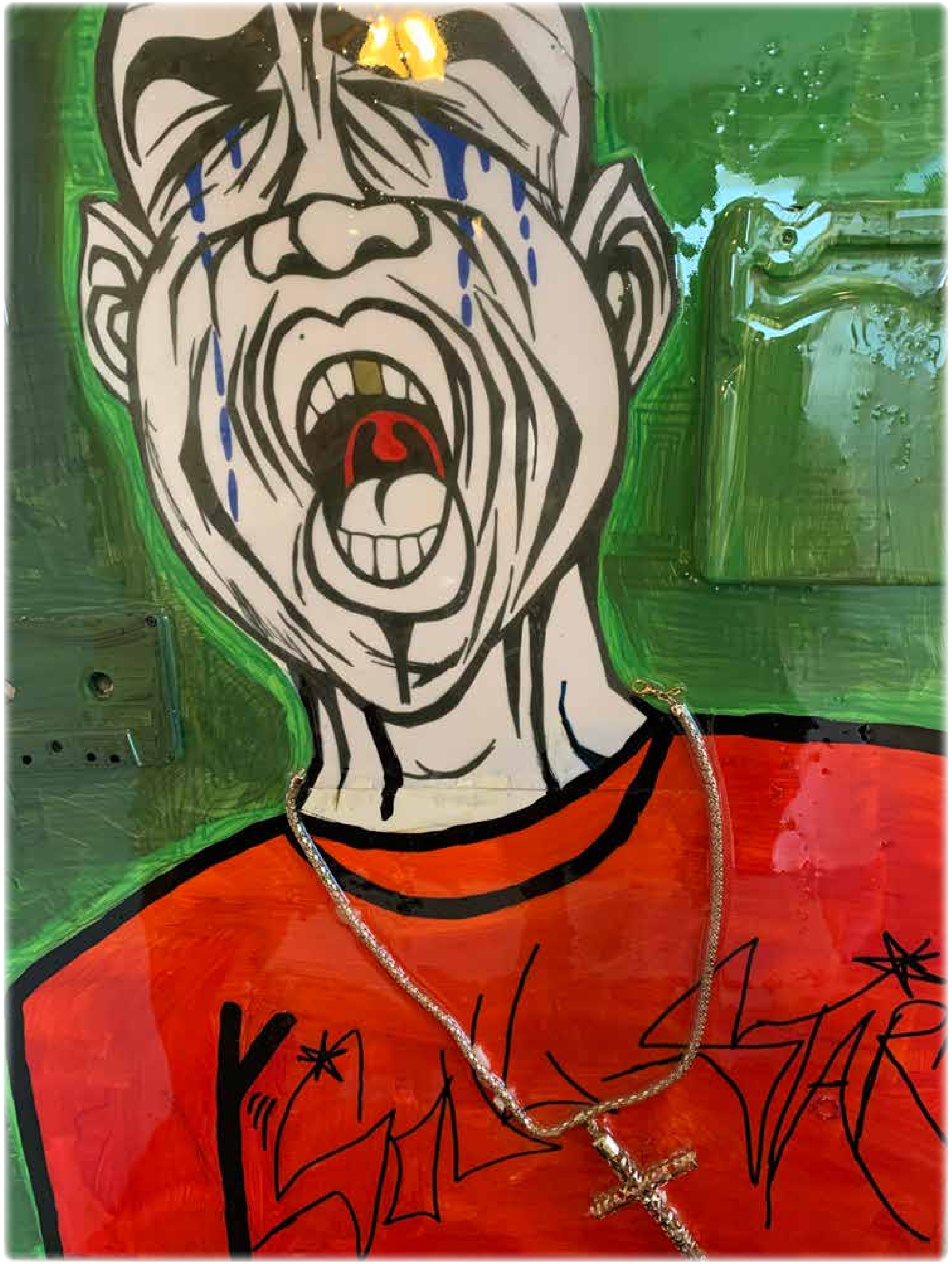
CY: That's great! Now, when is your gallery open?

JH: We changed our work schedules around so we could be here during the week. So Monday through Friday, 10:00 to 2:00, and then on Saturdays, 10:00 to 6:00, going into spring and summer. Because we figure people get out more.

CY: You sound so busy! I don't know how you get the time to get your work done! How do you describe yourself? A musician? A poet? An artist? Because you do all those things...

JH: I've just been using the word "creative." Because, hey, I'm holding my own. We gonna hold our own.

CYNTHIA ROBINSON YOUNG is an adjunct professor of Exceptional Education at Covenant College and a graduate student in English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her work has appeared in various journals including *Sixfold*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Rigorous*, and forthcoming in *The Writer's Chronicle*. For her chapbook, *Migration*, she was named Finalist in the 2019 Georgia Author of the Year Award in this category.



Finding the Otter

Tiffany Herron

> “Appearing and disappearing **under the dark model-green water** are two otters.

We make our first stop along the Hiwassee River in the mid-morning. It’s a bright day, but it’s before the intense August heat bears down on us here in the Cherokee National Forest. Before the rush of released water from the dam, the river has not reached maximum current, but its roaring is the only thing I can hear. We stand on a sandy bank. My partner throws a few casts and then tries to whisper something to me. I can see the excitement on his face as he points to a specific spot on the river, and there, appearing and disappearing under the dark model-green water, are two otters.

One of the creatures has a fish, and the other is sliding over and behind its companion as if shyly begging for a bite. I am beyond ecstatic, and I anxiously hold on to the moment as the two creatures make their way past us, allowing the current to take them downstream. Without thought, I dash into the forest, assuming I am following them. I lope as quickly as I can on an overgrown path, ignoring the pricks of briars to my arms and the tacky strings of spider webs across my face.

> “Without thought, **I dash into** the forest.

At last, I come to a place where the water eddies, and its commotion now is more of a hushed gurgle. I stop as quickly as I started. A worn log is stuck into the rich russet mud of the bank, protruding out into deeper water. Now, in the cool shadows of the woods, I am just two steps away from the creature dining greedily on its meal. I pretend to be a tree. The otter has propped itself on the log and is holding its snack with both paws. Clearly visible are the animal’s light pink flesh inside its mouth and little pointed teeth as it chews enthusiastically. I can almost hear the smack of its gums, the crunch of little bones, and the rip of fatty fish skin.

I hold my breath and wish the surge of blood running through my ears would stop. The glossy blue-white meat of the fish shines pearly, glinting in the sun. As the form of the food becomes less recognizable, I remember the smell of freshly caught crappie in my kitchen sink. My body is in a tightly strung stillness, my face frozen in a smile. My muscles are constricted as if I am about to leap, and my eyes are pushing their way out of my head, straining to see more, begging to be closer. The otter stops eating and looks around. Its dark brown fur is rich and wet, and I can imagine it feels like my dog after swimming. The otter’s nose twitches, its tiny ears on alert. I am staring so hard I can hear nothing now, not even the water of the river or the thuds of my heart. The other otter pops up beside its friend and waits a few seconds. I blink, and they are both gone.

TIFFANY HERRON is an emerging writer and graduate student in the MA English Creative Writing program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her poems and fiction are an eclectic mix of genres and she is currently working on a collection of creative nonfiction essays that follow her journey of discovering her Pacific Island roots. Tiffany has published in the *Samoa News*, the program for *Lemonade the Lecture*, and in *Chronicle,* the literary magazine of Clemson University.

Picky

Colin Rochelle

When I was in second grade, I was diagnosed with a case of "terminal pickiness" by a guidance counselor. Don't worry: it's as nonfatal as it is incurable. My parents had recommended I speak to my guidance counselor because I didn't like any of the pens or pencils in my pencil case, and when my teacher offered me the ones in her bright red pencil cup, I didn't like those either. My vocabulary wasn't refined enough to explain to the adults in my life exactly why I didn't enjoy their writing tools. I just knew I hated everything they had given me.

As I got older, I realized my pickiness had metastasized beyond pens and pencils: I was picky about so many things. I cannot emphasize this enough: my pickiness was never about anything important. I had strong opinions about what video game controllers I used, the keyboards I typed on, the chairs I sat in, the materials of the clothes I wore, the proper way to scramble eggs. I had opinions about the Pilot G2 (underwhelming, but better than a Bic) before I had opinions about who should be my senator.

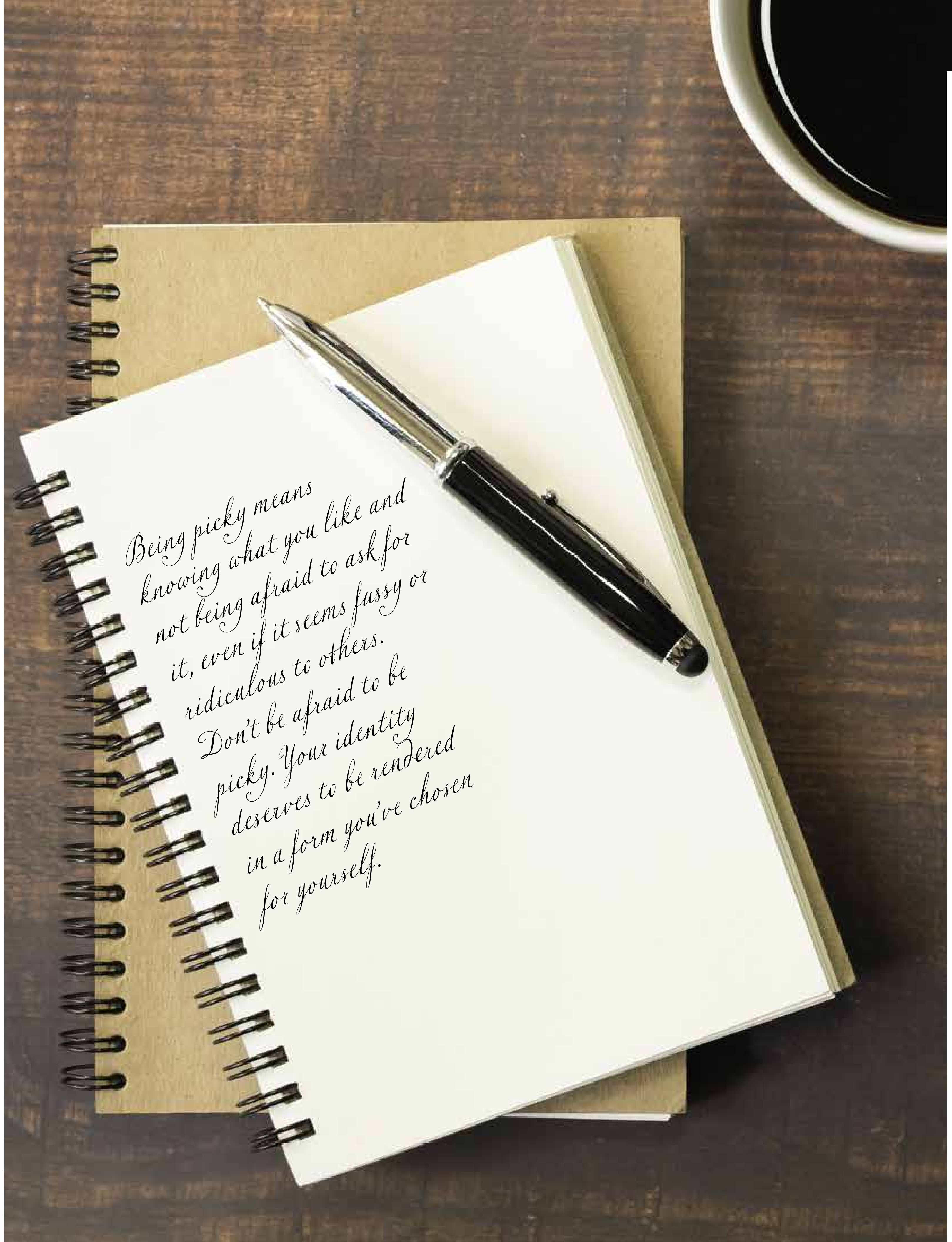
My pickiness did not go unnoticed. When the boys in my class were assigned Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, one of my peers commented that I couldn't survive in the wilderness because I was "too picky." That was always fine with me: maybe if Brian were a little pickier, he wouldn't have gotten on that Cessna 406.

The men in my life were always trying to talk me out of my pickiness. Pickiness is a nuisance, as anyone trying to feed a hungry child can testify. Most folks didn't want to hear my thoughts on the balance differences between the Lamy Safari and the Pilot Metropolitan or why the best way to prepare bacon is in the oven. However, I always suspected the difference between me and my male peers and family members wasn't practical. It was religious.

Here, men are expected to "make do" with what's given to them and not complain. We are asked to accept the ways our elders have done things and continue doing them that way. "My dad knew how to change the flywheel on any Chevy truck made after 1976, so why shouldn't I?" "If you're fortunate enough to be from a family that can afford to send you to school with pens and pencils, who are you to say they're not good enough?"

Telling a teenage boy from Waynesboro, Tennessee, that his preferred truck manufacturer hasn't been good for years can feel like an affront to his worldview. Not only is the object of his faith called into question, but it makes him feel like his whole support network has been deceived and is therefore stupid. His faith is in his loved ones, believing that they would guide him to choosing a good life.

At that time, I didn't know what my faith was in. I just wanted something that hadn't been picked out for me.



Despite my wide range of picky opinions, I've always been pickiest about stationery. To this day I'm an analog journaler, even though I do most of my other writing on a computer. At one time, my office had a leaning tower of half-filled notebooks resting against my desk. I've yet to find the perfect one.

However, I think my pickiness about stationery is one of the most Southern things about me.

I live in a city famous for its publicly sourced gigabit Internet, even though Iron Man 3 conveniently forgot this fact. I write on a MacBook. Many folks here walk around with supercomputers in their pockets. Isn't writing something in a Leuchtturm notebook with a Pilot Prera outdated? Pretentious? Elitist, even?

Maybe. In some ways technology is a great equalizer. As someone with terrible handwriting (that was a separate guidance counselor visit), I was so excited when I first typed into a word processor. What I typed looked exactly the same as what everyone else typed: 12 point Times New Roman. As a fat person, I appreciate the fact that my social media profiles look like everyone else's. I don't have to worry about paying significantly more to fit into a bigger Instagram feed. Unless you've heard my voice, you probably aren't reading this with my particular (almost non-existent) Middle Tennessee accent, which would make some folks think I'm less intelligent or more bigoted than I am. I'll be the first to admit: being reduced to the same data points as everyone else has its advantages.

But it's a relief when I can express myself in a way that looks different from everyone else. My handwriting is no less a part of me just because it isn't perfect. It's a reminder that I don't have to accept what's already been chosen for me.

In many ways, pen and paper are incompatible with contemporary life. Journal entries eventually decay. It's nearly impossible to share your doodles with others without digitizing it in some way. Flipping through a notebook to find where you put your notes on that marinara sauce recipe you tried months ago is mind-numbing. But it also allows me to slow down and fine-tune my reality. It reminds me that the defaults weren't made with me in mind. It's antiquated, sure. But I'm all for anything that lets me step out of the flow of information to just dwell in my thoughts.

Being picky means knowing what you like and not being afraid to ask for it, even if it seems fussy or ridiculous to others. Don't be afraid to be picky. Your identiy deserves to be rendered in a form you've chosen for yourself.

COLIN ROCHELLE is a graduate student of Rhetoric and Professional Writing at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He was a warehouse worker before switching to a life of UX design and academics. He and his spouse share a home in Chattanooga with their cat, dog, and piles of notebooks. If you see him on the street one day, he will stop listening to podcasts just long enough to chat. He was voted "Best to Bring Home to Your Family" in his high school graduating class.

Photo by Cynthia Robinson Young

SAVANNAH

Cynthia Robinson Young

They say Savannah is built upon graveyards
and so the ghosts have nowhere else to wander
but through the city

in search for their loved ones. They sit
in the neighborhood park Squares,
hovering with the homeless. At the counter bar
in the Ole Pink House basement they sit,
staring at patrons in the mirror.

They walk with Ghost Charlie when
he roams the hallways of East Bay Inn.
They knock on doors

as if they have lost their keys,
or enter uninvited,
standing at tourists' bedside
in the middle of the night.

I know how to go to Savannah.
I was Home as soon as I set my feet
on the cobblestones at the river.
Ancient parts of me felt familiar.
I am visiting family
who have been here once before,
in a long ago I can't remember.

So I know how to be in Savannah
when night falls with a foggy humid mist
that doesn't mask ethereal ancestors
watching from the trees above.

I know how to walk in Savannah
but I don't know how to sleep there,
not with spirits standing in corners.
and all that whispering!
as though I cannot hear them

conversing as I struggle
to silence their slave stories
in my search for the rest
they cannot find.

WHEN THE OLYMPICS CAME TO CHATTANOOGA

GAYVIN POWERS

> “There were regularly **20-30 female and male rowers** training in Chattanooga from 1994-1996; they all needed **housing, food, work, consistency** and emotional support.

A quarter century ago, the magic of the Olympics lit up Chattanooga like a wildfire. It was common to see Olympic rowers, like Greek gods and goddesses, gliding in their shells along the Tennessee River. For three years, Chattanoogans watched these dynamic rowers transform from college graduates into Olympians.

The 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games brought these rowers to Chattanooga. Scores of them trained at the William C. Raoul Rowing Center from 1994-1996 and many local families opened their homes to support them. These families had a behind-the-scenes look at some of the challenges the athletes faced on their rise toward Olympus. One of those families were the Pattens, who opened their doors to many female rowers.

In crew, swing is when teammates are in sync with each other, and the Pattens had plenty of swing. In 1993, the rowing center was built in Chattanooga and Lee Patten was a board member of Lookout Rowing Club (LRC), one of the three teams housed there. By 1994, Ashlee Patten, Lee’s daughter, was a recent national rowing champion from Princeton University and accepted the position as the Assistant National Team Coach for rowing in Chattanooga. No one has to consult an oracle or have the stars align to know that was a lot of swing.

The push to have Olympic rowers train in Chattanooga came from Robert Espeseth, the current rowing coach at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and Hartmut Buschbacher, the U.S. national rowing coach at the time.

“Hartmut wanted the women to have their own place and feel good training for the Olympics,” Ashlee said.

To make this happen, the rowing community got involved to ensure there were places for the athletes to live and thrive while preparing. There were regularly 20-30 female and male rowers training in Chattanooga from 1994-1996; they all needed housing, food, work, consistency and emotional support.

“People got invited to train for weeks or months. There was always a steady stream of visiting rowers who needed free places to stay,” Ashlee said.

Ashlee was responsible for ensuring the athletes had safe, supportive places to live. Most of the athletes came from Stanford, Harvard and Princeton and their families lived several states away. As a result, the local host families ended up becoming surrogate families for the athletes.

Lee recalled Ashlee phoning her a few times, asking, “Mom, you don’t mind if we put another rower at our house, do you?”It was common to see the rowers drive up in “small, economical cars with a futon strapped to the top and a dog hanging out the side window,” Lee added.

Barbara Byrne, now Barbara Byrne Stefan, was one the athletes who stayed with the Pattens. Barbara, who rowed a single, was the youngest of seven children and the daughter of the former governor of New Jersey.

Avery Patten, Ashlee’s 10-year-old little sister, shared a room with Barbara and Lika, her dog. Avery loved having the athletes around and described herself as “paddling after them.” As a result, a few people mentioned that they saw her as their mascot.

The athletes “brought enthusiasm and verve to your whole household. Think about it, they were young women in training. Rowing is a very different sport than other sports. There is a tremendous amount of dependency to show up,” Lee said. “What your family did was absorb them into your life and wish them well.”

The athletes needed a stable home life since their intense six-day-per-week training schedule was grueling. Avery said, “They woke up at 5:30 a.m., rowed until 10 a.m., slept from 10 until 3, and worked out with weights in the afternoon. Then they ate and went to bed.”

Whether they were training or in public, the athletes tended to draw attention. During training, Lee said, “The McCallie boys were quite taken with the fact that these Greek Goddesses had come in.” She chuckles while remembering how Chattanoogans would stop to stare at the extremely fit, 6-foot-tall rowers.

Despite the unwanted attention, the rowers were focused on their routine. To adhere to such a strict routine required discipline. Lee mentioned that, “Everything they ate, wore, and times (to be places) were dictated by their training schedule. Every day counted…No one broke routine.”

Why was such discipline necessary? According to Daniel James Brown, author of *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, “Physiologists, in fact, have calculated that rowing a two-thousand-meter race—the Olympic standard—takes the same physiological toll as playing two basketball games back-to-back. And it exacts that toll in about six minutes.”

With such an extraordinary challenge facing crew members, one may think that competition in the boat house would be fierce. On the contrary, Lee said, “There was never competition going on. They kept the competition to themselves.” While everyone was striving for a seat “in” the boat, there wasn’t room for competition “on” the boat. The individual rower must be disciplined and have trained hard, however, competition kills unification of the team and getting a swing that is essential for winning races.

If not competing openly was a silent rule, then defining boundaries in the boat house and at home was another. Since Lee was on the LRC board, she wanted the athletes to have a separation between home and training.

“I never went to see them practice. I felt like they needed a stable home life. So I didn’t watch them at practice. I didn’t discuss rowing. I (only) talked about their personal lives with them.”

Ashlee expressed how important it is for athletes in their prime to have “supportive people who will be there physically and emotionally. It’s a huge physical and emotional peak to compete (and win). They can crash hard…It’s important to have someone be there to catch them.”

Along this journey, injuries and ailments were common for the athletes. Barbara got sick while training for the Pan Am Games and couldn’t take medicine due to fear of being disqualified for the Olympics. Lee took care of her and said, “At the time, I had tremendous fibromyalgia. Stacy and Louisa (rowers staying with the Pattens) would sit down with me and said, ‘You’re going through your own Olympic training. If we’re going through this, you can go through that.’”

The defending world champion U.S. women’s eight.

Photo: Oli Rosenbladt

Photo by Oli Rosenbladt used with permission of *Rowing News*

“Do I have a **gold medal** in my house?

After Barbara healed, she rowed a single in the Pan Am Games in Argentina. Once Barbara returned from the competition, Lee knew she couldn’t ask Barbara if she won or lost. It was too exciting for Lee to imagine if Barbara had won, and she didn’t want to bring down her morale if she had lost.

Instead, Lee asked her, “‘Barb, did you do what you wanted to do?’ Barbara ducked her head and said, ‘Yes.’” Later in the day, Lee recounted that she was “swimming at the Y and thought, ‘I think I have a gold medal at my house.’ I came back home and I said, ‘Barbara Byrne, do I have a gold medal in my house?’ Barbara said, ‘Yes, you do.’”

Barbara hit a peak winning a gold medal in the Pan Am Games, but no one close to her had seen it. With such extreme highs and lows, Ashlee said, “If you don’t have someone there to celebrate with, it’s almost like it didn’t happen. You go from the top of the world to being alone when there is no one to share it with you...If no one is there to see, did it happen?”

While training for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, the National Women’s Eight Rowing Team won gold at the World Championship in Finland in 1995. Since no one was there to witness the team’s win and there wasn’t a guaranteed medal in the upcoming Olympics, the Pattens and the local rowing community threw a huge party at Ashland Farms, a family estate outside of Chattanooga, to commemorate their win as World Champions.

Two hundred people showed up to celebrate the athletes. “I wasn’t surprised that the community was supportive,” Ashlee said. “They liked having the team here. They followed them.”

The athletes tended to be shy, despite drawing attention to themselves due to their height and toned physical condition. They weren’t used to having attention on them. At the event, Lee partnered each athlete with an outgoing member of the community, encouraging them to mingle and banning the athletes from hiding in the kitchen. To celebrate the athletes, their medals hung from trees, Mary Tanner sang the National Anthem, the Fort Oglethorpe military color guard performed, and the athletes’ names were announced while walking down the historical staircase to cheers of “USA.”

After the party, Lee realized that, “We were not holding an Olympic party. We were holding a patriotic party.”

When it came time to travel to Atlanta for the Olympics, sisters Mary and Betsy McCagg, known as “The Twins,” and Monica Tranel Michini, who had stayed with the Pattens, were selected for the Women’s Coxed Eight team. The U.S. team was favored to win after beating the Canadian team at the 1996 Lucerne Rotsee Regatta by 3 seconds. During the 2,000 meters of the Olympic regatta, the U.S. team battled against Romania, Canada and Belarus, missing a medal by 1.75 seconds.

While friends and family were stunned by their fourth place finish, Monica told Avery that, “I will not be defined by defeat.” That attitude may be what defines an Olympian.

Around the time of the ancient Olympics, Lao-Tsu, a Chinese philosopher, reportedly said, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” The same can be said for Olympic athletes and those who support them. Rowing is a quick sport filled with intense dedication, training and adrenaline. Once athletes reach a peak there is only one way to go afterward. When the 1996 Olympic flame went out, the athletes left Chattanooga and the Pattens went back to their life at Ashland Farms where U.S. flags once flew, gold medals hung from trees and World Champion Goddesses mingled among mortals.

GAYVIN POWERS is a Creative Writing graduate student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and a former adjunct professor of humanities, film and screenwriting at Sandhills Community College. She is a writer-in-residence at Weymouth Center and has over 60 published pieces, including articles in *PineStraw* magazine, a Southern award-winning publication. She is a West Coast transplant, who recently discovered that her ancestors hail from both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

Late August Collage

RAY ZIMMERMAN

Begin with the yellow flowers of a Jerusalem artichoke. Make strands of its essence, warp and woof, a framework it is.

Weave in the golden-brown of coreopsis, the pink of coneflower. Add the red of fireweed and you have made a start. Weave in the rich brown feather of a wren, dropped near her empty nest.

Eggshells make a nice touch if you can find them.

Hang your tapestry from the branch of a hickory. Let it ripen with the nuts.

When the time is right, add lichen: the gray of old man’s beard, the ephemeral green vessels called pixie cups, the red topped British soldiers.

Let it bake in the August sun and steep in the lightning of sudden storms. It will ride its eyes from the muddy rivulets flowing from the impact of pounding male rain and soften with the nurturing mists of female rain.

Now your tapestry is ready to receive the gentle songs of chickadees and nuthatches. Let the pileated woodpecker drop chips from his drill as he feeds on carpenter ants. A few will stick.

Seek the help of a spider. Her silk will bind the work together. Hang your tapestry on your wall if you must. When the spiderlings hatch from its thread you will understand that it belongs in the woods. This will happen at the time of day when the buzzing of cicadas gives way to the trills of katydids.

Hang it on your porch. Let light out from Altair and Deneb illuminate its recesses. It will waffle in the breeze of early morning as bats retire to take their daytime rest.

Ask yourself, have I woven this tapestry, or has it woven me.

on bonnaroo

Moe Long

There are few things I hate more in this world than the Tennessee heat, big crowds, and porta-potties. So you can only imagine my half-hearted smile as my aunt told me that, for my high school graduation gift, she'd bought me a ticket to Bonnaroo. I feigned excitement and peered over to my parents who knew why I hadn't already jumped the gun and found a ticket myself.

I'm almost five feet and three inches tall—perfect elbow-to-nose height amidst concert goers. The Tennessee heat is sweltering and sticky. Not ideal for a four-day festival on a farm. And I really, truly would prefer digging a hole in the woods over using a portable toilet that sits in the sun, on said farm, for a long weekend. I'd even done the research in an attempt to overcome my prejudices. Manchester is located about an hour and a half from Chattanooga and has a population of just under 11,000 people. It's quaint. In the country. Bonnaroo, on the other hand, was in the middle of Manchester, on a 700-acre farm. That's approximately 375 football fields, for those of you who need a visual. Bonnaroo has been known to bring the population of "The Farm," as it's affectionately called, to 80,000 people. Just for the weekend. Which makes it the sixth-largest city in Tennessee. For a weekend. This is an introvert's nightmare. On top of all of this, if I wanted to leave after the first night, I was trapped: I would be carpooling, my LG enV 2 didn't have GPS, and even if it did, it wouldn't get me out of the sticks.

My dad could tell I was conflicted, and, either out of sheer entertainment or for fear of wasting money, convinced me to go. I look back on it now and would definitely label it as peer-pressure, but sometimes you need a helpful push out of your comfort zone. And the man had some valid points:

1. It's the summer after senior year. Your friends will soon be all over the U.S. and who knows if you'll have this chance again (enter: FOMO).
2. All of your favorte bands are going (again, FOMO).
3. It's already paid for (it's FREE).

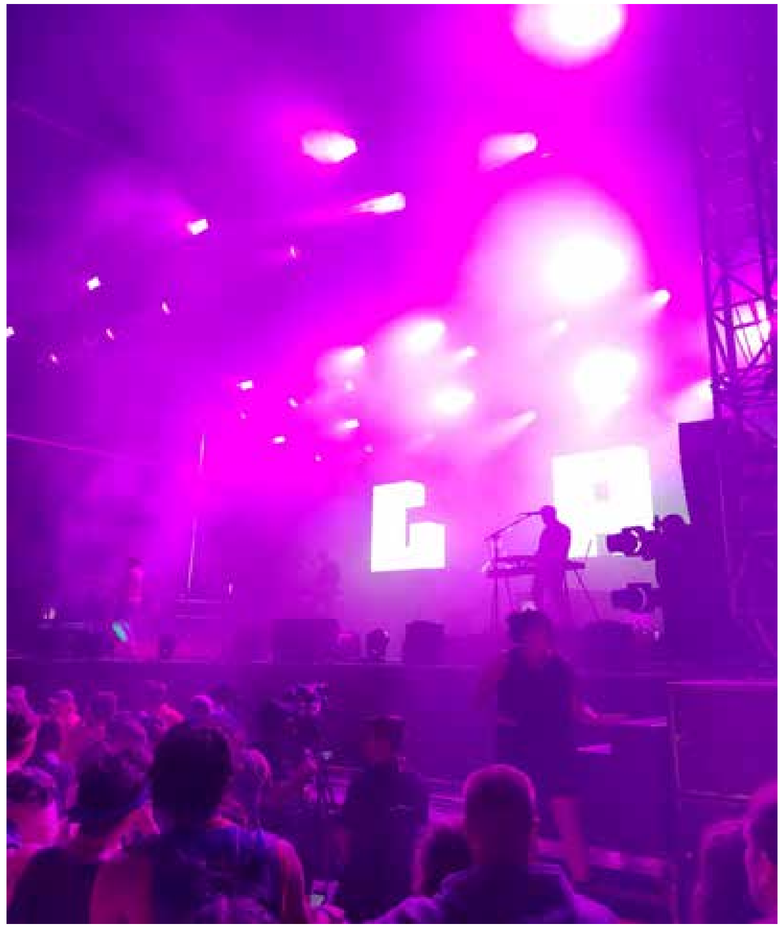
So I thought to myself: suck it up. You're going to survive—maybe not thrive—but there's just really not a good enough reason not to go. Against my own judgment, and with parental pressure to get over myself, I packed my bags and hitched a ride.

Photos courtesy of Anna Humphrey and Moe Long

I spent the whole car ride wondering how bad of an idea this was. My growing concerns quickly turned to excited nerves as we neared the exit and pulled over into the line of cars. It would take us nearly three hours to reach the security check-point. What if they found weed on me even though I've never smoked it—let alone bought it? Or worse, what if they found the big glass jar of dill pickles I brought? Glass is a big no-no on the farm. Luckily, as soon as those thoughts came, they passed. We got through security with ease. On the other side were horses that looked as big as Clydesdales. Perched atop their backs were men and women in red uniforms trotting around inside the gates. They were far scarier than the people searching our cars. We had lucked out with a group of people who just shifted our stuff around, opened a duffel bag or two, and gave us a high-five. So onward we drove, through the campgrounds, mindful of the patrol horses and pedestrians, and eventually wound up at our site.

It was nothing fancy—we popped up tents and easy-ups and camped beside our cars. The first night was simple. We walked around, got comfy at our site, and discussed the game plan for the next day. We made friends with our neighbors, siblings from Long Island. Rosie could be heard at all hours, day or night, singing, drinking, telling her soon-to-be-cop brother about the drugs she was doing. She liked to have a good time. We didn't want to hear her at night though…our tents were a little too close for comfort. Rookie mistake.

Walking through the campgrounds the next day was absolutely mind-boggling. Men in banana-hammocks and women wearing nothing but fanny-packs with tops painted on were as common as Chacos



on a college campus. A person dressed in a Captain Crunch costume rallied people to dance with him. I walked by a tent advertising orgies and a man carrying a sign on his chest that read: “Got Opium?” To say it was culture shock would be an understatement.

The funny thing about all of this was nobody passed judgment. There weren’t people asking the orgy tent to take down their sign because it was offensive. Nobody asked the mostly nude people to put on more clothes. Pedestrians gave the guy with the opium sign high-fives when he approached, usually neglecting the sign draped around his neck. People did as they pleased and as long as they weren’t harming anyone, they kept doing their thing. Everyone was excited to be where they were and to befriend the people around them.

Once inside Centeroo—where the stages are—I saw why people raved about this place. It was an adult theme park. A giant mushroom fountain spouted water. People flocked to it like animals to a watering hole in the desert. Large statues of quirky characters I couldn’t recognize were poised for photo ops. A giant iron pig called Hamageddon contained a pig roasting on a spit—the immediate area smelled of bacon. Trees were few and far between, serving as perfect napping spots for between shows. Though napping wasn’t necessary—at any given point you could find a a live show. Chance The Rapper was known to come out and perform with different acts, and had appeared with Earth, Wind & Fire and Miguel alike. Alexander from Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes started dancing through the festival with his bandmates, playing music and singing tunes. Singers like Leon Bridges, yet to have record hits, played at the smallest, low-key stages tucked between other vendors.

> “Which makes it the sixth-largest city in Tennessee. For a weekend.

It didn’t matter where you turned, you’d find people dancing, drinking, napping, eating, hula-hooping, smiling. I had never seen anything like it before. I didn’t think twice about the heat. I hated the porta-potties, sure, but even that became just part of the experience. My germaphobe heart couldn’t be bothered by it (but did learn to not wear overalls in there). And the crowds? Well, I didn’t meet a soul who I didn’t like. Everyone was there to see one thing: a good show. We all wanted everyone to have one thing: a good time. It was truly that simple when you boiled it all down. I’ve put aside my distaste for the heat, for the crowds, for the filth because I’ve found a place where people come to enjoy a weekend escape from reality. It turns out that a little pressure to step outside of my comfort zone went a long way. There’s a magic on The Farm that comes to life when 80,000 strangers come together for an experience unlike any other.

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