Mountain Laurels
IN GRATITUDE
DR. B. J. ROBINSON

The editors of *Mountain Laurels* wish to take this
Opportunity to thank Dr. Robinson
For her years of dedicated
Service to the betterment
Of our cultural
Life.
Her
*Joie de vivre,*
Unerring eye for art,
Her hard and effective work,
Humanity, love, and contagious laugh
Are deeply missed. We dedicate this volume to her.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

*Columbia* by Rachel Warner “Poetry First Place” .................................................. 3  
*Untitled* by Rachel Warner “Poetry Second Place” ................................................. 4  
*Smoothed Over* by Brandon Barton “Poetry Third Place” ........................................ 5  
*And Yet...* by Amanda L. Wood .................................................................................. 6  
*Sleepless* by Crystal Corn .......................................................................................... 7  
*Untitled* by Brittany Tennant ....................................................................................... 8  
*The Stage* by Samantha Lovely .................................................................................... 9  
*James Corbin* by Marcus Hawkins ............................................................................. 10  
*Autumn-tinted* by Brittany Tennant ........................................................................... 11  
*Untitled* by Brittany Tennant ..................................................................................... 12  
*5 a.m. Girl* by Brittany Tennant .................................................................................. 13  
*A Love Letter* by Anonymous .................................................................................... 14  
*Why I Can’t Write Poetry* by Lori Schink ................................................................. 15  
*I Take a Thousand Grains of Sand* by Shannon Wright ............................................. 16  
*Out I Stepped* by Katie Folk ....................................................................................... 17  
*My Mistake* by Kristen Thompson ............................................................................. 17  
*Tea Party* by Brittany Tennant ................................................................................... 18  
*Red, Green, and Brown* by Amanda Griffin ............................................................... 18  
*Untitled* by Brittany Tennant ..................................................................................... 19  
*Untitled* by Brandon Barton ....................................................................................... 20  
*Untitled* by Brandon Barton ....................................................................................... 21  
*Untitled* by G.J. Bennett ............................................................................................. 22  
*I Don’t Know the Rules to the Game* by Vanessa Behler .......................................... 22  
*That Haunting Melody* by Debbie Martin .................................................................. 23  
*Requiem Sestina for a Local Legend* by Gary Hamrick, Jr. ....................................... 24  
*Gratitude* by Crystal Corn .......................................................................................... 25  
*Break the Cycle* by Kristen Peek ............................................................................... 25  
*My First* by DeVonnia Bonimy .................................................................................. 26  
*Normal Exemption* by Amanda Griffin ..................................................................... 27  
*The Unknown* by David Adams ................................................................................. 28  
*Opal* by Debbie Martin ............................................................................................... 28  
*Untitled* by Emily Lancaster ....................................................................................... 29  
*Growing Wiser* by Lisha M. Yeary ............................................................................. 29  
*Lessons That I Have Learned* by Damie Meyer “Inman Award Winner” ............... 30
My on the road man
Has an on the road mind
With no regard to space or time
When his feet hit the road
He is more than free
Making deep casual confessions
To a Mexican gypsy
(Loving two women
Who have the same name
One is adventure
The other is plain)
All is forgotten
Nothing concrete -real
With me left at home
To work and feel
The absence of the one
Who will never be mine
With a wandering heart
To match his on the road mind
Silence may be golden
But not in my shoes
As I wait in the dark
Singing stay at home blues
Am I kidding myself?
Is it all just a joke?
My visions of love
Wiped out in a stroke
The road might be long
But it comes to an end
Is the precious hope held
By the once lover
Now friend
When facts are faced
One thing's left to find
You can take a man off the road
But not the road from the mind
SECOND PLACE

UNTITLED
Rachel Warner

Cement jungle climbing to the sky
Zombies walking reckless
Reflect in my eye
Searching for a chemical fix
To leave their minds and lives
So far behind...
Store-fronts selling
Cheap thrills that cost
Everything Do I buy?
Do I pause to look around?

-My feet hitting the pavement
The only sound-

Homeless desperate faces
Making their beds on the ground
My eyes fixed ahead
(My heart looking around)
But there you are
Wrapped in robes
Long hair
Blending in with the backdrop
I'm trying not to stare
Yet totally unprepared
For an outstretched hand
And eyes clear- so clear
Interpreting my life in a glance
Holding out at second chance

I've been in buildings with
Ceilings of tradition:
Prayers, kneeling, and holy water
But holding your hand
I found the true meaning
Meeting you on a street
Called Sodom
SMOOTHED OVER
Brandon Barton

I sometimes recall as a child
the joy found in skipping stones
two three four whee! ha!
see if you can do it again
says father behind his fishing pole
I remember the crabgrass
infected cement basketball court
where as young men my friends
and I soaked ourselves in
the sweat of competition
that poured from out smiling faces
I dream of my grandfather
sitting at the kitchen table of
wooden leg supported by
an age old wooden block
telling me about the thrill
of the hunt and seeing
no fear in his eyes with
knowledge of an impending death
I close my eyes and see
the beautiful love that so
recently touched my heart
that held my hand
and cried in our last embrace
And now all I can think
about are those skipping stones
and their forgotten memories
sealed in a watery grave
AND YET...
Amanda L. Wood

Looking at myself in the mirror had not always been such a painful experience. It started to get painful after I gained weight. But then I got used to averting my eyes from my body as much as possible. I would look only at my eyes; they were magnetizing and beautiful. All of my character rested there. But then ... but then...

The eyes are dull now. Still green, but they’re dull now. Every day I look at them and study them, trying to find the missing element. What neutralizes such a powerful magnet? What makes such intense beauty disappear? They don’t sparkle.

I try not to blame him. It’s hard, but I try not to blame him for taking it away. For taking the magnetism and beauty away. For eight long (and sometimes happy) months my eyes sparkled just for him. The magnetism and beauty were the words I used to speak when I couldn’t speak. They were his. I made myself believe that they were his. I made myself believe I had been born for him.

But one day he lied. He lied and it hurt; the eyes stopped sparkling then. The magnetism and beauty had melted away. I tried to convince myself that if I allowed myself to be the cause for the loss of my magical eyes, he would maintain control over me. Perhaps he still does. But every time I look in the mirror, the magnetism and beauty are gone. They have been stolen from me and I will never get them back.

Ah, but I’m no weakling. I will re-create these special gifts my eyes once offered. One day I will meet someone who will be worthy of my eyes. The magnetism and beauty will return that day. I look forward to the day when I can look at myself in the eyes as I had before.

Until that day comes, I remain. Nothing profound. I simply remain.
SLEEPLESS
Crystal Corn

When I have fears I may sleep not upon my soft and humble cot,
For anger, dread or restlessness,
or some great burden on my chest
I think about your glowing smile
and if you could come stay a while,
How all bad things would part asunder
and how much sweeter I would slumber.
I think, if in our early fate,
we’d met before our meeting date,
How much sweeter would time been spent.
How much more I’d been content.
I think about eternity,
so glad that you’ll be there with me.
Now life fantasmic will not end.
Once we part, we’ll meet again.
When I have fears I may sleep not upon my soft and humble cot,
when fear or dread will not subdue,
all I must do is think of you.
I am in love with sleeping in the sun
And often rest before my work is done.

And while I know how it could be so sweet
To labor on until my task’s complete,

And cease without the hanging stress
Of work left waiting as I rest,

The sky, a hypnotizing, healing blue
Seduces me before I’m through,

And washes me with golden shine
That penetrates like golden wine,

And like the dry will seek relief from wet,
The wind blows crisp and takes my sweat,

Then the richness of the trees and grass
Nourish, until my pains have passed.

I return refreshed with strength renewed
Surprising all with my light and vibrant mood.
THE STAGE
Samantha Lovely

It's this feeling I get deep inside
That everything is right where it should
The best in life is right next to my soul
And I feel that I am finally understood

Driving in the path I've repeated many times over
All the world faintly disappears
It's just me, the sky and the florescent stars
I find my soul yearning for those magical tears

The teardrops I get when everything is perfect
Perfect just how it sounds
I feel as if I am floating high above
Bouncing in and out of invisible bounds

My heart just explodes with mercy
For those I have felt restraint
I am that untouchable person I saw once before
Beautiful shades of translucent paint

If time were to freeze right within itself
I'd want it to be right here and now
All of the pains, hurts, regrets
Gently lifting themselves as I stand up to bow

The encore fills the walls of my self
I smile and stand in awe
Right here on the stage of life... this is it
I peer up at the Light and the curtain comes to a fall
Melodies unheard.
Spoken word!
What’s the truth man? You play it my brother.
   You play it well, better than no other.
You swing that guitar and stroke those strings
   as the melody soothes and the music brings;
The crowd as they cheer and gallantly fear
   the rhythm you bring as their hearts draw near.
They swing and they sway and they laugh and they cry
   and they listen all night to your sweet lullaby.
You rock them to sleep and you wake them again
   and you take them to dawn as the day begins.
Don’t stop my brother I’m beginning to groove,
   go ahead and play and bust a move.
Hit that tone and squeak that cord.
Give them a reason to yell out MORE!
   Play on my brother! Play on!
I watch my mother raking leaves in the yard, and note her brisk, no-nonsense motions forcing the clutter of leaves, many still autumn colored and not as easily snagged by the rake's teeth, into neat and nice orderly piles. Not a single thing can escape placement, and we both know that she will have the old chore knocked out in half the time it would have taken me. She is not distracted by the earth-scented wind, only annoyed if it breathes too hard and ruffles a leaf or two out of place. I want to burst out this door and astonish her, kicking up those neat piles into an autumn-rainbow storm so that all she'll see is the autumn-tinted wind of her daughter and she'll wonder what's caused this chaos—supernatural forces or that part of herself that watches from the window
Time pricks my body which leaks my soul into the world. My fear manifests in darkness, becoming warped black shadows to haunt peripheral vision. Tornadoes rip through lovely lives with the aid of my jealousy. My pain spills and evaporates under the sun, only to attack the world with a multiplied army. Then my rage shakes society until tears burn tiny paths through its mask, while my selfishness stifles the stars with fog. My cruelty becomes a blanket of snow to freeze northern thoughts with seasonal triumph. Shuffling away is my weakness, desperate for a new host. But I am not left with euphoria-

My confidence spreads rainbows on freshly thrashed skies, and my hope shakes random stars from the night, while the joy in my heart joins spring in melting the winter snow. My passion crashes with the waves of the ocean, and my femininity sprinkles fields with wildflowers. Defiant of the night, my strength battles the demons of darkness, while the wind that sings the song of dreams whisks away my laughter. My love, spouting like a fountain, explodes in a burst of colors and flavors, then is quickly absorbed by thirsty souls. Now Eternity opens like a secret door, and Time bids me farewell.
5 a.m. girl
Brittany Tennant

you know that I
am not a morning person

I am no more fond
of that hazy space

the intermingling of light and dark

shadow

than sun or moon flowers

there is too much silence
around the rocks that hit my window

truth

in the fading of the stars

the slow awakening
of the sky

in my disturbed sleep

you know
I hate being your 5 a.m. girl

I think of how
we used to hold the sun

soft afternoon layers
melting around us like so much
candle wax

we used to dance our way to the moon

and sing
through shadows
soft gray-velvet layers
shining silver in the mist
unfolding

I sleep
lightly

the better to be

your 5 a.m. girl

A LOVE LETTER
Anonymous

Dear S_____,

Upon speaking to you, a fluttering wing of pleasure alighted upon my heart as you smiled and raised your eyes toward mine. What a beautiful hue are those orbs; dark as the deepest depths of he sea, wrapped passionately with a sky of cloudless blue. I am fruitless in thinking of you, wishing desperately to suckle your lotus-like fruit and become forgetful of my former love and the path to take me there. Neither song nor singer can tear me away from your gaze, nor will I fear any tragedy that sits in wait before you. I will sail on forever, and remain wishful in your eyes
WHY I CAN’T WRITE POETRY

Lori Schink

I have no talent for rhyme
Nor any deep or hidden passions
Nobody Romantically has moved me
So why would I write poetry

Some who were close to me have died
But with silly words and bad verse I will not remember them
Memory serves me well enough
So why should I write poetry

There are many in this world more artistically inclined
Who are said to be able to move a person through their writing.
I am not one of these people

There are writers who can make you see events
Descriptions that become reality for you even when it’s fiction
I am most definitely not one of those people

So I think I’ll do the world a favor and not write
Poetry.
I TAKE A THOUSAND GRAINS OF SAND
Shannon Wright

I take a thousand grains of sand
And combine them by the water
The most magnificent castle sits
And I begin to dream.
Within the sandy walls there are balls in every room
And dresses freely flowing.
Men bow to their ladies and offer the strong hands;
A gloved hand accepts, the magic begins.
Couples circle, spin, twist' and laugh as the orchestra plays.
The waltz time music is enchanting.
The flutes trill like birds and the cymbals crash
Like ocean waves
Ocean waves . . . I remember the water and tiny grains
Of sand
I retreat to the water, and the music subsides.
OUT I STEPPED
Katie Folk

Out I stepped, into the night,
With nothing on my head.
The damp, cold air, it longed to reach me,
And turn my nose bright red.
It reached its hands t’ward me in vain,
In an attempt to chill my heart.
Try as it may to cause me pain,
My mind was someplace else.

MY MISTAKE
Kristen Thompson

He keeps me in his showcase
high upon some shelf.
I’m his glass menagerie
not allowed to be myself.
He takes me out quite often
to use to his delight,
then quickly returns me
when another is in sight.
Through mirror refracted glass
I’m inside peering out
and I see my haunted image
and I know without a doubt.
The tear-stained windows to my heart
are somehow smudged within
with carelessly dirty fingerprints
of someone I let in.
**Tea Party**  
Brittany Tennant

Let us dance with the sugar dish of Life  
Or else our bitter flavors may ferment  
And choke our tender throats.

Let us swim in the creamer cup of Dreams  
That milky bliss is quite refreshing after darkness—  
The coolness calming to our steaming hands.

And then ... we'll dare the cliffs of scone!  
And dive into our lives, for a risk is a chance  
Even if we are merely having a spot of tea.

---

**Red, Green, and Brown**  
Amanda Griffin

Red, Green, and Brown have formed a maelstrom  
Twisting and turning like unfertile clouds, black as pitch behind my back.

I look ahead, try to see which painting has lost its colors.  
I gaze because I am at the crossroads.

Either I will step on the colors, don't mind, just walk away and carry with me the  
colors spattered over my footsteps  
or  
I'll create a sunset composed of the colors red, green, and brown.

Right now I'm doing both.  
I am painting a sunset with my splattered footsteps.
UNTITLED
Brittany Tennant

My sheets are
stained, my heart
is subdued, and my
blood is quiet. I
cannot warm in
my thick blanket, my
body shivers and
his sweat chills on my skin.
I am so tired
of reaching for
euphoria, then
finding the dullness
again. I thought
dreams were like
rivers, or bubbles, or
some other
aesthetically pleasing
simile
intoxicated on
flowery language, but
this one is like a stone
chained to my foot, I
know its weight, its
static and heavy
presence, and I am
reminded of my
failings with every
other step I take.
UNTITLED
Brandon Barton

Gotta go man gotta go can’t stop for the
boiled peanuts on the side of the road
we have to see it all
Dancing towering juggernauts of trees flying by
smiling for the crazy souls in the
speed machine
See it there!
The end of the road
Way too fast man didn’t see it
take a right my mad gas astronaut
West now can’t stop man
gotta go gotta go
Mad inferno steaming blacktop we see
Only out of the rearview mirror
There’s nothing ahead of us but blue sky
and strangeness
Gotta go man Gotta go
UNTITLED

Brandon Barton

Madness is still in this world today
as it stares at me motionless and quiet
Ask me why America
I want to ride in a police car naked
with shackles on and sing
Ask me why America
I want to ask God to make a miracle
for me because I feel I am an exception
Ask me why America
I want to wipe my ass with a tax
reform issue and hand it to my local
bureaucrat
Ask me why America
I want to push a button and murder
innocent people over the price of gasoline
Ask me why America
I want to pay for sex and gamble
all of my money away while I drink
myself to death and laugh in people's faces
Ask me why America
I want to laugh in the face of conformity
and sit Bodhisattva style on the roof of my
shanty amidst suburbia infestation
Ask me why America
I want to spend my hard earned money
eating lunch and dinner while stuffing
one dollar bills in an addict's panties
Ask me why America
I want to inject myself with heroine death
while my teeth chatter in cocaine annoyance
and sooth my bloody fingernails in wine
Ask me why America
I want to cut down and sell an acre
of oak trees so that I can feel good
in planting new saplings
Ask me why America
I want to have sex with an older woman
so I can tell my friends about it
and have them stare and lust after one of us
Ask me why America, just ask me.
I held a pair of yellowed booties,
Shoes that a baby once wore.
It was the only pair he lived long enough
To wear. It was God’s will he should
Never need more.

I remember that they were once beautiful,
Hand-made with love, by the hands of his
Own mother. It grieved her heart to not
Be able to crochet him any others.

The angels came and took him home early.
She lost him while he slept.
So what a treasure those booties became
That until her own death, she had kept.

She remembered the day she had made them
And the times he wore them on his feet.
She often thought about the day,
When again their eyes would meet.

And you know all too well.
Your skin so warm and your breath
Upon my neck - I am not strong,
Only afraid.
I tremble.
And so you turn away.
It is too easy to win.
That Haunting Melody ...  Debbie Martin

23
REQUIEM SESTINA FOR A LOCAL LEGEND

Gary Hamrick Jr.

How does it feel to be so beautifully awkward,
chosen during summer last days of the dog-
The usual spiral and all the old cliches are endless.
And I’m sitting here, your latest fashion altar’s bottom
that was made for you ... your poison was methylene crystal
and mine is still roadside diners and stale black coffee.

The walls, back of the coffee shop, lit by black light ...
we debated rather or not, that Gypsy was awkward
to speak with ... neither of us knew, believing Crystals
never tell the truth. still Call me an old dog,
in this nowhere town and you’re at the bottom of
the forefront playing the superstar wannabe ... endlessly.

Wanted to tell about the times still change so endlessly,
so I started writing things in this black notebook,
I hid your secrets a lot better than you did ... like the dog ...
belonging to you, when you were a waitress, and awkward
confidante ... with your grey-eyed glances like dimmed crystal
as we raced to see who would be the first to hit the bottom.

There’s a story here, or use to be ... maybe as clear as crystal.
If it had been finished, maybe it would have been nearly endless.
Then again, we all wish that about the beautiful dog days
But the break ends and we return to days of black clouds and rain ... I
talked with your brother ... and the news he gave was awkward-
He said you were not on the road, after all, that you finally hit bottom.

I was told the story about the night you finally hit the bottom.
Suffering the effects of your lifestyle of poison crystal dream ...
He said you’d be out of rehab soon, the experience would be awkward.
The rumors and lies about where ya been - they will be endless...
and I imagine you’ll go back to your combat boots and black eyeliner,
but will you be going back to the dogs you hung out with?

Effects of looking back on our lives with a dog’s eye view...
Everything looks in front of you when you look up from the bottom.
Shades of red and blue and green but not quite white, gray and black.
You cannot nor need to see the future with cards or tainted crystals ...
and you don’t have to wander the world, alone- feeling empty and endless.
You still have one friend ... that cliche may seem awkward.

I wrote this awkward letter in a black notebook ... a dog day in August.
an endless thought taking crystal shapes in memory without a bottom.
GRATITUDE
Crystal Corn

A poor hungry kitten appears on my stoop
Broken by the cruelty of the world
Overcome with compassion I move to the kitchen
And return with a bowl of my rations for him
I watch the little one fill himself with all that he desires
And leave him to his private bliss

I return to my door after hours past
Only to find my humble rations revisited upon the stairs

BREAK THE CYCLE
Kristen Peek

The rain called “destruction” falls once again.
I put my hands upon the window pane of the world,
Longing to be out there.
Children play in my heart,
But their laughter is silenced from the outside.
My choice is to either defy or die,
And that is the game that we all now must play.
People pass bearing their masks of expressions,
But behind those there is a dark nothingness.
I won’t waste my time and become another casualty of society.
I won’t fall in line and become another victim of conformity.
I’m not like them, and I never will be.
I close my eyes and shut out reality,
because the world in my mind is at peace.
But, when I open them again,
I have to pretend that everything is okay.
My body is forever destined to remain here,
But my soul will be the lucky one to escape.
MY FIRST
DeVonnia Bonimy

An abysmal malaise, anguish
that bathes my heart with each passing day,
Evolves
in retrospect with the blistering thought of you.
A love that revealed itself grew like the
fragile inflorescence toward the
warmth of the sun, and was
beclouded by your desire to be loved,
yet not. Love me.
It erupted. Plunging the yolk of my porcelain shell;
bleeding uncontrollably, inadvertently compelled
to satiate you.
Shadowed by our bedaubing passage.
Trembling realism was concealed through
instruction in your numbing academy,
becoming
Overt in nature, yet cowardly retreating
behind glib eyes and a rhythmic tongue that ravished me.
Sucking, biting and licking the impetuous youth
and purity of my love,
to roughly Band-Aid your lacking.
Chiseled and gourd-like, this heart will
mend: misshapen, degraded with paranoia
and psychosis.
Matured yet nauseated with bitter clairvoyance
by those who attempt to revive its genesis.
‘Tis not better to have loved and lost.
The aesthetics of love are sufficient.
NORMAL EXEMPTION
Amanda Griffin

My clothes just look better on skinny people.
- Calvin Klein

Like cherry apple stars in an orchard overflowing with love and promise, he said.
That is what we are, what we can be.

What? Cherry apples? An orchard? (Is that what love is?)
A cherry orchard? (Right. An orchard.)

One you graze through with ease, then move on to the next orchard.
Yes, I know your style.

Sorry, I'm not a size three with long (perfect) blond hair and a charming smile.
I apologize for the lack of sparkling white teeth and an enchanting laugh.

I beg forgiveness for my deficiency in body content: no waifish body with a flawless complexion here.

My Bad!!!
Somehow, I escaped the one percent of the population created faultless.
Thumbs down to the girl who isn't picture perfect!
So journey on, man, journey through all the orchards in the world.

Nope, you'll never know or understand the true me.
That (perhaps) I am an unsatisfactory combination of honesty and love you'll never have familiarity with.

My biggest fault in your eyes is that I am exempt from the one percent.
But soon,
You'll realize. Oh yes, soon.
THE UNKNOWN
David Adams

One night I woke, and rose out of bed.
Looking about the room to see if something was there.
As I looked about the shadows, something moved along the wall.
As I looked upon it, I jumped with fear.
As it moves out of the shadows it startles me.
Then it disappears with no face; into the shadows without a trace.
GROWING WISER
Lisha M. Yeary

My girlhood dreams,
Precious and loved, universal to all,
Disintegrate and pass softly with time

‘Till hair’s gray season
Chimes upon the clock of my youth

Once again awakening me
From the slumber of Maturity’s embrace
Lessons that I Have Learned: Memories of My Childhood  
Damie Meyer

The diversity of all of the places that I have lived is remarkable. What is even more amazing is that all of the people that I have met and all of the places that I have been to, all come together to form one great nation. Whenever I hear the song, “America the Beautiful,” the words conjure up memories of my childhood. The “spacious skies” in the song remind me of the deep blue of a fall afternoon in central California, where the sky seems to reach out forever, and the clouds seem so touchable, at the same time very close and very far away. When I hear of the “amber waves of grain,” I think about the panhandle of northern Texas and southern Oklahoma, where both the original American pioneers and modern-day frontiersmen can see for miles and miles. I can still see in my mind the view from an overpass, when the summer wind was blowing through the fields of corn and wheat. The stalks rippled in the wind, shining yellow and gold in the sunlight for as far as I could see. The “purple mountains majesty” of my memories is the Rocky Mountains on a rainy day just before winter set in. I remember crossing the mountains with my mom and brother in our old 1979 Ford pickup truck on the way to yet another town and another life. The rain came down so hard that when we finally stopped for gas and a bathroom break, the water on level ground was three inches deep. The flat fertile fields of the South and of California are my fruited plains. From the orange groves and vineyards of California, to the pecan orchards in east Texas, to the peanut fields and cotton fields of Georgia, I am amazed at the
productivity of the land.

My travels were a part of an amazing childhood. My parents got divorced when I was four years old. Six months later, my mom packed up my brother and me and took us from our hometown of Hereford, Texas, to Brownsville, a small town in south Texas. My mom had taken a job with an industrial construction company, and the move to Brownsville was just the first in a series of relocations that spanned my childhood. As I was growing up, I went through a constant cycle of being the new kid at school, and then, just as I was starting to make friends, having to move to a new town. My brother and I averaged three schools per year, all across the country. The only constant factors in my childhood were my mom and my brother and the certainty that I would learn something new and unique every place that I went. The exposure to many different places and people that I received as a child is mostly responsible for who I am now.

One of the most significant lessons that I’ve learned is the importance of toleration of others. By tolerance, I mean acceptance of others, and it was not always an easy lesson. I do not know what it is like to be a racial minority in American society. However, I can relate and sympathize with those who were teased because of their skin color, or those who didn’t fit in as children simply because their family was different. I know what it’s like to be the only gringo family on a Mexican block, and I know what it’s like to attend a bilingual school in California where almost everyone except for me spoke Spanish. Many of my classmates were migrant children who missed out on a lot of opportunities. The migrant kids didn’t accept me because I was white and spoke only English. The resident children didn’t accept me because my family moved from place to place every few months. I also know what it feels like to be one of only four white kids at a predominately black school in Dublin, Georgia. I remember being teased because I
had red hair, freckles, and white skin. Every day, I remember what it is like to be different, and how much I wanted to be accepted for who I was, regardless of my background. Because of my own experiences, I would never allow anyone else to feel alone and different just because they are not the same as their peers.

Because I was often an outcast, I learned to be an independent person with a strong belief in myself. I learned that the only people that I really needed on my side were the ones that I could already count on, my family. My family was always there for me if I needed them, but they didn’t try to stifle me or smother my independence. The fact that my brother and I took care of ourselves most of the time, because my mom had to work as many as twelve or fourteen hours a day and we didn’t have the money for baby-sitters or daycare, only strengthened my independence. I guess that we were typical latchkey kids, but my brother and I weren’t unhappy. We had each other, our schoolwork, and a list of chores long enough to keep us busy and out of trouble. My strength and independence are the two character traits that I most thank my mother for. Whether she meant to or not, her choices led me to become a responsible young adult with no fear of being on my own, and I look at every new encounter as a challenge and an adventure.

Challenge and adventure is part of why I joined the army three months after I turned seventeen. The other part of why I joined the army is that I have a strong desire to serve my country. At least one person from every generation of my family has been in military service, and several more have served the United States government in a variety of other capacities. National service is a common theme in my family and in myself. I grew up listening to an old record of my mother’s that featured John Wayne reading patriotic poems. I listened to that record so often that I finally wore it out. I appreciated the message of the poems, and my mother and grandparents helped to foster my nationalism
by reading one of the poems out loud every year before we sat down to our Fourth of July meal. My mother always made sure that my brother and I knew that July 4th is more than just a day for barbecues. The Fourth of July, along with Veteran’s Day and Memorial Day, always remind me of the bad times and the good times that my country has gone through so that I can enjoy the freedom that I do today. I love my country, and so patriotism is another of the lessons that I’ve learned.

My experiences have also taught me two lessons about hard work. The first is that when my mom and brother and I had only each other to depend upon, if we had not worked together as a team, then we would not have made it. It takes a lot of hard work to be a family. The second lesson that I learned was that as long as I could find one activity that I was good at, and worked hard at it, then I could be successful. My mother is an extremely smart woman, and she encouraged me to study hard for school and to take up reading as a hobby. I did both, and soon I was being enrolled in the gifted classes at school. Even if I did not always make straight A’s on my report cards, I always loved learning new ideas through books and from teachers. I was never really miserable when I had to go to a new school because I always had plenty of books to read and lots of stories to tell my new friends about the places that I had lived.

My childhood was anything but typical. I had a lot of experiences at a young age that have helped to develop my character. I cherish what my life has taught me, and I hope that I will always have the ability to look on the world with the understanding and wisdom wrought from my experiences. At the same time, I hope that I never lose the wonderment that I have at the beauty of the people and places of my world. I am grateful for all of the lessons I have learned, and I will always look forward to sharing my experiences with others.