Lights and Shadows 2001

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Lights & Shadows

Art & Literary Magazine

The Traveler

"I don't know when it was in,"

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Editor's note

"Freedom of expression is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every form of freedom" (Benjamin N. Cardozo)

It was half past midnight. I struggled with fatigue and won, slowly typing the final words of my essay. I saved my manuscript and turned off the computer monitor.

I leaned back in my chair. Little breezes came in through my open window and played with wisps of my hair as I sipped a warm drink. I rubbed my neck and stretched my arms to the ceiling.

With a final deep breath, I flicked off the lamp and collapsed onto my burgundy sofa. I closed my eyes and prepared for enriching slumber.

As I pulled an old afghan over my bare legs, I could feel sleep begin to overtake my being. Then, it happened again.

I tried to ignore it, kept my eyes shut. I just couldn't keep the possible consequences out of my mind. Facing the reality of what I must do, I slung the afghan onto the floor, stood up, and turned on the lamp. The bright light made me squint a little.

I opened my pen drawer, took out a writing instrument, and jotted down the thoughts that continued to reverberate through me. Only when I had every last idea written onto the paper would my mind relax.

Inspiration and ideas for writing come at some of the most inconvenient times — while I am trying to sleep, driving down the road, during tests in class. And these ideas will not release me until I transport them onto a piece of paper.

A creative spirit dwells within us, and we need to unleash those passionate ideas and remarkable discoveries. When the moment comes, do not hesitate. Find a notebook, a napkin, a paper sack. Write down the revelation.

Without giving these few minutes of our time, we may miss out on some beautiful fragments about ourselves. Without giving a few moments to the pen, we may rob the world of beauty and truth. Cherishing the treasures of self-discovery and revelation, give these breakthrough moments immortality through creative writing. Share this time with the world and give others universal strengths by allowing them to look inside you.

Creative writing lets other people inside — lets them see who you really are. When creativity calls, write it down, and bring others into the matrix of your existence.

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I had a day off from work and I was using my dad’s workshop to refinish some furniture. While trying to bleach the discolored veneer, I had 30 minutes to wait between coats of solvent. I went to work in the woodpile. My parents still heat with wood; the fireplace in my mother’s house is well used. The bricks on the back of the hearth are blackened from years of smoke. But the bricks on the front of the hearth shine from backsides sliding in close on cold mornings. As I started setting up the pieces to be split I recalled my grandfather.

Growing up, I watched my grandfather do many things, but mostly I watched him work in the woodpile or eat. Splitting wood is the setting of most of my memories of my grandfather. He would look over the wood then only hit it once. When a piece of firewood is struck true, it splits. First it rings, then cracks as it separates. Just by the sounds you can tell if someone knows what he is doing.

Mother’s dad could peel firewood like he was separating an onion from its skin. He used only an axe (his favorite axe had been sharpened so many times it was shaped like a butter knife) to split off smaller chunks of wood. He never worked fast, but he never slowed down either; he moved from task to task as needed. If he found a good piece of hickory while splitting firewood, he would set it aside to make handles out of during the winter months.

He taught me to start by first setting the wood on end. Second, wipe away any sawdust or dirt on the surface so you can read the grain. After deciding where the natural breaks are, you look over the outside of the piece for knots that might trap your axe. If you find something that might make the piece too time-consuming to use an axe, you move up to a wood maul (I prefer an eight-pound weight with a gentle taper and shallow cutting face). In the toughest cases, a steel wedge and a sledgehammer must be used to split the wood to a usable shape. All of the wood can be busted; the trick is not to wear yourself out doing it. All you are looking for is that first split, once that first piece goes, it will give up completely. The rest is just a matter of tapping it in the right spots.

The other thing I liked watching my grandfather do was eating. He enjoyed eating. The top of his lunch box, which should have had the thermos, was filled end to end with Little Debbie Snack Cakes. The bottom of the lunch box was filled with whatever my grandmother had fried for breakfast, (she cooked every morning) the leftover biscuits and ham sandwiches, and at least one 3 Musketeers Bar. This menu never varied. He always said you couldn’t work if you don’t eat.

Thousands of Southern men had to go north during the years following the First World War. The Depression started in 1919 for rural Alabama, not with a
Before the wedding she gave her daughter the bankbook to her egg account, work, like clearing the swamps, had to be contracted out because of the dangerous work environment. Using dynamite in August to move stumps from snake-filled malarial sloughs was too dangerous for most, even during the Depression. A solution was found for the needed labor. A local subcontractor would be used; the subcontractors were the landlords of the sharecroppers. They gave the croppers the choice of clearing swamps in the summer and getting to stay in their houses through the winter, or moving on. Sometimes, if not enough workers could be found in an area, the taking line was moved. By encompassing some crossroad community or group of homes, the residents would have little choice but to volunteer to help clear the land.

My grandparents, Noble and Myrtle Vaden, were over 28 years old when they got married. Myrtle's mother did not hold out much hope for the endeavor. Before the wedding she gave her daughter the bankbook to her egg account, saying that my grandmother was going to need the money more than she would. The egg account was women's money. It was made from selling the extra eggs, poultry and occasional quarts of wild blackberries a wife came up with in the area, the taking line was moved. By encompassing some crossroad community or group of homes, the residents would have little choice but to volunteer to help clear the land.

In 1936, the Tennessee Valley Authority started work on creating Wilson Lake. It was a project with a threefold goal: flood control, cheap electricity, and jobs. The first step in the actual construction was deciding the size and shape of the lake, and then marking that outline on the ground. This line was called the taking line. If you lived or worked land inside of this line you had to move and give up the land. The second step was to move every grave, destroy every building, cut every tree and remove every stump from inside the taking line. The labor for most of this work was easy to find because this was during the 1930s. Some of the hardest work, like clearing the swamps, had to be contracted out because of the dangerous work environment. Using dynamite in August to move stumps from snake-filled malarial sloughs was too dangerous for most, even during the Depression.

A solution was found for the needed labor. A local subcontractor would be used; the subcontractors were the landlords of the sharecroppers. They gave the croppers the choice of clearing swamps in the summer and getting to stay in their houses through the winter, or moving on. Sometimes, if not enough workers could be found in an area, the taking line was moved. By encompassing some crossroad community or group of homes, the residents would have little choice but to volunteer to help clear the land.

In 1931 Papa went north to find work. His brother had already moved to Ohio to find work. He followed in the spring after he put a crop in. He was home in less than three weeks; he said "I'd rather starve in Alabama than live in Cincinnati."

When the chance to work clearing land for the TVA came, he went to work. The subcontractor for the area my grandfather was working had laid out the work areas in a peculiar pattern. The way the contract worked was you were given an area to clear off. The logs had to be cut, stumps removed and burned. When everything was done, you got paid. If you didn't have your assigned area logged and cleared by the closing date of the contract, you didn't get paid. The reason the work plots were set up in odd patterns was that every plot contained a cypress tree. Cypress will not burn; the men who didn't get rid of the cypress would not get paid. When the end of the contract came at least one scorched cypress stump was left on every plot. Except one. My great-uncle and grandfather had gone at night and floated out all of their cypress stumps and had hidden them in the brush piles on other plots. The reason they did it at night was that if everyone knew how the contractor was going to screw them the contractor would come up with a different way to cheat them. By doing this way, the contractor had to pay them or admit he had deliberately tried to cheat everyone. By working during the day with a crosscut saw and mule team, then coming back after supper to swim the cypress stumps to other parts of the swamp, the family made another year. They were the only ones that got paid for that summer of work.

The woodpile at my mother's home is behind the garden shed. I was working my way through the larger pieces, setting them on end, so that when I started splitting the wood, I would not have to take a break. I had a few minutes before the oak desk I was working on would need another going over. The first pieces split without incident.

My mother came out to ask if I was staying for supper. As I hit the last piece I heard the thunk of the head snapping off my wood splitter. The eight pound steel head spun end over end until it struck my left shin. I had a flashback of when a pulling guard caught my knee high on a trap block during high school football. My mother came over as I was cursing and grunting in pain. Her remark was "Come on in and eat." That's my mother. Food fixes everything. As the blood was seeping through my denim pant leg, she hurried inside to fix me a plate.

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Mother called out the back door for me to come eat. I was trying to remove
the remaining maul handle from the tool. Two small metal wedges held on the
head of the maul. They had to be beaten out before a new handle could be fit-
ted. I knew that my dad would fix the new handle as soon as he got home. But
I needed to have it ready to go when he got there.

Dad got in from work just as I was finishing with the head. I explained what
had happened. He responded, “When we get through eating I’ll take you to the
doctor.” I assured him that I was okay; then we went in to eat.

When Dad and I went into the house the smell of a cooked meal filled our nos-
trils. Mother, in less than 30 minutes, had cooked steak and gravy potatoes and
rolls. The table was set with ice in the glasses. When I would find the bottom
of the plate, more was piled on until I said I was full.

As I put away my tools and cleaned up my work area I told Dad that I would
drive myself to the doctor. He agreed.

The doctor told my grandmother that he had seen drowning victims with better
blood work than my grandfather’s. He was in his 80s: had eaten fried pork every
day of his life, smoked Prince Albert in a can for over 60 years and was dying. He
decided that no measures should be taken; it was time to go. The doctor put him
on a limited diet and medication to make him comfortable and waited.

My uncles brought him some soft-serve vanilla ice cream. One uncle had to
hold him in his arms while the other fed him. A nurse came in and told them
they had to quit; ice cream was bad for him. They told him to go away; they
knew what they were doing.

We smuggled my 18-month-old daughter in to see my grandfather. With my
wife as a lookout and my having to hide in a utility corridor, we got her in. From
his bed he reached up and played with her hands and told me to take care of
her. He had always taken time to play with babies; everyone has a story of his
stopping whatever he was doing to hold a child. Many of his grandchildren
learned profanity at an early age from listening to him. We slipped out through
the doctor’s lounge before we were caught.

In 1901 the state of Alabama passed its new Constitution; it made institution-
al racism a matter of law. The Jim Crow laws came into being to break up the
partnership of black and white farmers who were trying to gain a better stan-
dard of living. The literacy test, poll tax and the grandfather clause were part of
the plan to deny the vote to the majority of men in Alabama.

The other prong of the attack was the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. The
Klan had all but died out prior to the turn of the century except in some isolat-
ed places. But to keep whites and blacks from working together it had to come
back. With help from local businessmen and pushing from church groups the
Klan was able to become the enforcement arm of the Alabama political system.

If a black became too prosperous he was accused of stealing, or he might have a
fire, maybe lose his land or have the Klan called in. Whites who helped blacks
could have the same things happen to them. The business interests of Alabama had
to keep blacks and whites fighting each other to keep making all of the profit.

Noble died with most of his kids and grandkids around him. Struggling to
breathe as his diaphragm gave out, he suffocated. When we went to the funeral
home to make the arrangements, they gave us an instruction packet for the most
commonly asked questions. Part of the packet is a booklet of plate labels, and an
accompanying worksheet for you to log in who brought what food and a
description of the plate involved along with label number.

After the funeral the visitors started coming until dark. Each brought some-
thing and ate a plate of food in return. After dark, the children of the black fam-
ilies who had worked with and for my grandfather in the ’30s and ’40s brought
food. The evening was always when the blacks would come visit my grandfa-
ther. My mother has childhood memories of hearing them talking while my
grandfather was splitting wood. My grandfather could read and add. The
blacks would bring cotton contracts and bills for him to read to them. While he
read they would split wood for him or stay out of sight. Reading for a neighbor,
especially if he was black, could get you in trouble. Why he helped them he
never said, he took a chance on losing his land for some reason. One lady whose
mother had worked picking cotton for him said that she grew up hearing about
my grandfather. Her mother had told her that he was the only farmer that had
one water bucket for his workers and family to share. That’s why she had to take
my grandmother some food. She stayed to eat with my mother and aunts laugh-
ing about days spent picking cotton.

At last count my grandmother had $56,000 in her egg account.
Mr. Norm's Lounge

The vinegar is turning a velvety green in the jar of pickled eggs. ESPN provides the only sunlight. The coming of Sports Center is the only way to mark the passage of time. The faces of the patrons are as fresh as the ashtrays that line the bar. Friends of Bill W. meet here when the other places aren't convenient. The jukebox struggles with the effort of sound in this tired place. More power drinking than conversation takes place at the bar. Dusty bags of BBQ pork rinds hang by the register, a Louisville Slugger is propped against the cooler.

The two divorce minimum keeps out the optimistic. Lowered expectations keep the neon-tanned crowd coming back.

— Brian Lindsey

Local Characters

Gilgamesh and Beowulf have opened a deli next to the “Ye Ole General Store.” The corned beef is to die for. They hope to cater to the late-night crowd. Walter Mitty gets his meal on a Kaiser roll. He strolls to the park munching on a kosher dill and takes a seat in front of the statue of W.C. Handy.

The lad from Shropshire wanders over from the Methodist Church’s flower garden. The funeral of his friend, the athlete, who had died too young, was over and the hearse was pulling away from the curb. A band of mercenaries is warming up for its recital under the stars. He walks to the bandstand to listen.

Milton is passing out flyers for a NOW rally, while being led around the fountain by his son. He encourages us to attend, we people of paradise who have lost our way. The stars are out and the streetlights illuminate my way as I wander in this space across from the library.

— Brian Lindsey
In the Company of Wolves

Like to Like,
not friends,
brothers.

Running,
scattered,
together.

In the shadows of moonlight,
traveling not searching,
taking what you find.

No plan,
confidence,
alive.

Experiencing sunrise,
instead of waiting for it.
Feasting on marrow,
in self-contained moments.
Living in every second,
breathing in air as powerful as sunlight.
Stalking life, fear an unknown,
my heartbeat with the intensity of the first raindrops on still water.

— Brian Lindsey

The Traveler

by Holly R. Dotson

I don’t know what it was in me that allowed me to pass her, walking the weight of her bike, loaded down with four huge laundry baskets, up the steep hill.

But I guess it was the same something that was in all the others that passed without a second glance or thought. And I don’t know what it was that made me turn around to go back. I waited until I could no longer see her straining figure before I veered to the left and drove onto the returning lane of divided highway — the feeling I had just wouldn’t let up, and I knew if I let the moment pass, something pure inside of me would die. I had choked that purity other times — numerous times — in my life. It was easy to ignore that silent voice, calling all the innocence and trust out of its grave in the adult heart. By the time you find your place in the world, it’s hidden so deep in that cove (buried away so it won’t hurt you) it can’t pull you from the rat race. Its tugs are too soft, its strings not quite reaching your mind. But today for some reason, it won.

Lack of faith — it keeps us all from doing what we know we should, and it’s the reason so many of us lie miserable without sleep at night. Lack of faith is the reason I passed her again, just kept going after all the effort of turning around. She was riding now, and I thought well, I guess that feeling was wrong. I mean, I can’t pull up to her and hand her the money when she’s riding like that. What would I do, throw it at her? Her white hair looked like a clean T-shirt waving from under the straw hat, the shorter sides flapping like sleeves. I could see her smile. It was blurred but big enough to see at sixty-five miles per hour, and it shone in the distance as I looked in my rearview mirror.

Maybe I shouldn’t stop I thought. I do have Grade, and what if she tries to steal the car And she might even be the lady that lives at the house with the Indian statues in the front yard. It would be embarrassing for both of us if I offered her money then. I could hear my three-month-old daughter in the back — babbles rising from her car seat. She had no cares, and a peace floated to the front with her little squeals and giggles. The woman was gone from my view. I had lost sight after topping another hill. There was a bridge ahead of me and on the other side I stopped and waited. Her figure popped over the rise of earth like a rollercoaster car getting ready for its plummeting thrill. She looked like a mirage with the sun shining from behind her — a ring of bronze encircled and rocked with her body as it peddled the heavy load.

I felt awkward. What was I to do? Just wait until she peddled by me, and open the door, stick out my hand and let her grab the money like a runner grabs cups of water during a race. I would have rolled down my window, but it was broken. I couldn’t get it back up to fit in the rubber around the top of the door, and I would not be able to hear my music over the seashell sound rushing into my
ears (lack of faith). She was wobbling closer, and I could see the contrast of her
hair against her skin — white against tan, both so crisply opposite they almost
looked like they didn't belong together. The bicycle was about three hundred
feet behind the car when I jumped out and started toward her. She let her feet
scoot across the ground, causing little clouds of dirt to puff around her on both
sides. They looked like wings opening from her back until they floated away
and out above her head. Fear replaced the cloud of dust as I neared, but her
smile remained intact. I read her thoughts through her expression. Ease fell over
her when she saw my dress — patchwork, and I knew she thought ah, a hippie.

"Hey," I said shortly. It was the only word that came to mind.

I studied the laundry baskets piled high on the rear of the bike, strapped
down with hemp twine and pulled with bungee cords. I was looking for the
shape of a body in the garbage bags that were smashed and compacted in the
mammoth plastic hampers (lack of faith), but saw nothing but overflowing fab­
ic — unsewn, frayed, wrinkled and waddled. There were ends of all colors
hanging out, a rainbow of triangle corners.

Her skin shone in the afternoon sun like a polished saddle — not the texture
of leather, just the color. It was deep orange-brown and thin and smooth, no
wrinkles. I was amazed. She looked so young to look so old. Her hair and miss­
ning front teeth made her seem ancient, Mother Earth maybe, traveling the land
the way men were intended to. I felt awed and tiny in her presence. Even if she
wasn't Mother Earth, she had been more places than I had been, seen more than
my eyes had seen, felt more than my heart had felt. The wisdom that comes
from being alone on the road formed a halo above her. It reached out to me and
my sandaled feet. Well, good luck on your travels? What kind of goodbye was
that? I could have said, "God bless" or just "Good luck." She probably wasn't
traveling to any destination. Who did I think she was ... Gulliver? I didn't look
back until I was in the car and had locked the doors (lack of faith). A childlike
feeling rushed over my body. I started thinking about all those people who didn't
stop. How unthoughtful! Couldn't stop from their speedy I-have-to-be-there­
by-this-time lives to help a poor woman out. The eighteen-wheeler didn't even
change lanes when they passed. I felt good about myself. Yes, I was the Good
Samaritan. But, I had no reason for feeling so good; I had done what I was sup­
posed to do, and hadn't even done it well. I was just as caught up in the rat race
as the others who did not stop, passing cars like they were fence posts. And I,
too, almost hadn't stopped — any other day I probably wouldn't have. I had not
stopped in the past.

I was ashamed of my actions. How could I treat her as less than human, and
feel good about it? Because I gave her a few dollars that I would've wasted on
an unneeded soda or candy bar? Oh how saintly of me.

She was digging in the top basket. Her smooth hands fumbled with a little
change purse, the plastic oval kind that is attached to a key ring and has a slit
that opens when you squeeze the sides — usually blue or green with a bank or
one-stop diner advertised on the non-slit side. I loved her. I wanted to get back
out of the car and return to her wisdom — give her the rest of my money, a twen­
ty and two Susan B. Anthony dollars, but I didn't. I drove off in my air-condi­tioned
car with Gracie still chattering to herself. Drove away to my pleasant life
with its pleasant apartment and its pleasant furniture and pleasant food and
pleasant stove and oven for cooking. I left her in the dust from my tires with the
afternoon heat pounding at her from all angles as she returned the oval money
holder to its place among the fabric. Her figure became smaller as feet turned
into miles. Finally, I could no longer see the dot that was her. It vanished in the
haze of heat, coating the earth. And I thought maybe she vanished with it.
Maybe, she was an angel, a messenger, a test from God, or maybe she was just
a traveler. I thought of her face again, and of her presence. But the feeling faded
as Gracie's babbles slowed into breaths of sleep.
"In the Hole"

Being

You're tired of me and I'm sick of this same, dirty place.

Standing in my sandals, my mascara streaked by the hot rain, I saw your face remembered you telling me I was the one that changed.

Watched you kiss her Maybelline reef coral mouth. Waited for you to see me through the cracked glass while you betrayed me and the Merry Christmas stocking on our door.

But I'm here on Mullen Street, three blocks from the house and I am still waiting for the eggs I sent you out for, for the things you were supposed to change. For the game of Sorry you promised our son.

— Elizabeth Mulder
Toasted Cheese Sandwiches
and Other Revisited Incidents

Her mother worked long hours so she spent her days in sheet tents held in place by cans of green beans and corn. Sometimes spinach, but not too often because those were usually given to canned food drives.

Her grandmother was her companion, matches her foe, and she learned to love cats.

Life was sustained by cans of Coke, and bowls of ice cream were stirred into runny milkshakes.

All day she chewed the same piece of gum her mother gave her before leaving for work, afraid, that if she spat it out, her mother’s goodbye kiss would lose its meaning.

— Elizabeth Mulder

Things I Forget

A one-bedroom house was the first home she could remember, and one roller skate with three working wheels had been her only mode of transportation.

Her grandaddy had given her two bulldog pups for the yard. One got run over and the other broke the girl’s front tooth.

At night she listened to her mother’s TV in the next room, rode her clip-clop horse, and tied her one-armed doll to the headboard so she couldn’t drop it during the night.

— Elizabeth Mulder
Patch Quilts, Greyhounds, and Pink Fairies

Her grandmother died when the girl was six leaving her with a hole in the carpet (she had dropped a match), a coughing yellow cat in her grandad’s chair, and a stick horse whose head the dog chewed off.

No cornbread for breakfast, walks to pet the neighbor’s horses (they will bite!), or discussions about green Kool-Aid.

She tore the pages out of her favorite book; no one else could read Hiram’s Red Shirt right.

— Elizabeth Mulder

To My Father

It’s winter, and it’s cold. The world moves on, not noticing, that I don’t know things that others think nothing about.

My nephew doesn’t know me. Watching my boyfriend shave is fascinating, and my mother’s loneliness is unjustified.

— Elizabeth Mulder

"Depths"

Bramey Brock Mepit Award
"Ravers"

Allison Brazier
1st Place Black & White

"Construction"

Bradley Brock
Merit Award
Without a Map

by Korey Martin

Where I went to high school, the largest mountain in the area was only a mile or so from downtown. There was a huge state park near the top, with a gorgeous view of the surrounding towns and countryside. It was great for picnics and field trips. The park's main attraction was the remains of an old church. Only three of the walls were still standing; the other had been reduced to rubble long ago. The church had been the town's claim to fame years ago. People would come from miles and miles away just to see its magnificent stained glass windows and cloud-tickling steeple. When it burned down around the turn of the century, it was considered a serious tragedy. People still come to see the church, but I suppose they come to mourn it now rather than revere it. Whenever I went up there, I always saw children climbing the hand-carved stones that once held the roof above the hundreds of churchgoers.

My favorite piece of the park was definitely the hiking trails. There were about a dozen of them, plunging down from the park and deep into the thick woods. A person may take a short, leisurely walk through the trees or a long, difficult hike in the wilderness, depending upon which path is chosen.

I have a vivid memory of a particular afternoon in the summer after third grade. I was sitting in my best friend's kitchen, in the house directly across the street from my own. His parents, who were much younger than mine, were preparing a lunch for us.

"Does your family go to church?" asked his mother.

"Nope," I replied.

"What religion are you?"

At the ripe old age of eight, I had never stepped foot inside a church. I had never seen the inside of a Bible, except the children's version in the waiting room of the dentist's office. I had never given a moment's thought to religion whatsoever. I cannot be sure what prompted my response.

"We're Catholic," I said, digging into an egg salad sandwich.

Kevin, my oldest brother, came for a visit shortly after the divorce. There are many years between me and Kevin, and I have always looked up to him. We put a solid hour's worth of planning into our hiking trip. We even got a topographical map of the entire park. Sunday morning, I emptied my school books from my backpack and placed our supplies inside. We carried with us the holy trinity of hiking supplies: granola bars, Gatorade, and a roll of toilet paper (just in case).

I also brought a hammer along. I had just gone to a gem and rock show at the convention center, and I was well on my way to becoming obsessed about a particular rock I saw over and over again. It was the type that looks normal on the outside, like any other rock, but was hollow on the inside. This pocket was lined with brilliant crystals, and at the show they were always chopped in half so that you could peer straight inside. I was determined to find my own rocks and strike it rich.

Kevin was coming to the end of his little-red-sportscar phase. The tiny Mazda looked out of place in the gravel parking lot, otherwise full of Jeeps, trucks, and SUVs. At eight thirty a.m., we locked up his car and headed for the trail.

Sixth grade was in an entirely new town. This time it was the buckle of the Bible Belt, and I was beginning to wonder. I knew by then that I wasn’t Catholic, as that apparently required some rudimentary knowledge of Latin and something called “Communion.” I still had never been to church, however, and still knew little about religion.

“So what church does your family go to?” asked Albert casually as we changed clothes for P.E.

“We don’t go to church.”

This was a shocking revelation. I was definitely a unique creature in these parts.

“So what religion are you?” he asked in disbelief.

“I don’t guess I am one.”

“Don’t you believe in God?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, of course I believe in God,” I said.

“But you don’t go to church?”

“Nope. Never have.”

“So you’re going to Hell?” he asked matter-of-factly.

That afternoon, I played dodgeball with the troubling new knowledge that, at the age of eleven, I had somehow already condemned myself to eternal damnation.

Kevin and I were definitely not professional hikers, but we sure had lots of enthusiasm. Our chosen trail ended abruptly with a giant corridor of fallen trees. I later learned that new powerlines were being strung across the mountainside to power the new suburb in the next valley. Determined to continue, I tossed the map into the construction crew’s trashcan and followed Kevin downhill. Luckily, we found another trail in only a few minutes. When this trail intersected with a dry creekbed, we left the trail in search of interesting rocks.

Over many years, the creek had carved amazing passages into the dirt and limestone. I followed the long, winding passages and felt like I was part of the scenery. I had to move slowly to take it all in.

We also began scanning the ground for rocks. The rounder ones, we assumed, would be the best candidates for holding gems inside. As the creek widened and...
flattened out, we could see the mountain towering behind us. We had gone quite far. After two and a half hours of hiking, we sat down to eat our granola bars and crack open a few rocks.

To a chubby eighth grader, nothing in the world sounds better than a pizza party. “Hey, you wanna come to a pizza party tonight?” Albert asked.

I had grown suspicious of a friend that would make fun of me for listening to “secular” music and then refuse to tell me what “secular” meant. But, as I said, nothing beats a pizza party.

We ended up in a large white room. It wasn’t actually in the church, I guess, but rather in one of the many buildings connected to it. It was probably the youth group’s room.

I was given a slice of pizza on a paper plate and a room-temperature cup of Coke. I took my seat next to Albert and the sermon began. In about forty-five seconds, I had eaten my slice of pizza. The sermon had begun, though, and it seemed rude to get up to get another piece. For the next hour or so, my blank stare shifted between the preacher, my empty plate, and a poster on the nearby wall encouraging kids to quit any job that might insist that they work on Sunday.

A few years later, as I began high school, my family started going to church. Apparently we had been Methodist the whole time, and no one bothered to tell me. I was intensely troubled about religion by then, especially the part about spending eternity in Hell, and I was very excited about finally finding some answers.

This was a lofty goal, however, which I would not reach for several reasons. First of all, the minister’s sermons were always centered around that morning’s “Peanuts” cartoon in the Sunday paper. This was a clear sign to me that I would not be finding God anytime soon. Charlie Brown is hardly a guide to spiritual awakening.

I also questioned the preacher’s work habits. If he wrote his entire speech between breakfast and church time each Sunday, how well prepared was it? What did he do with my father’s money the rest of the week?

The more important reason, however, was that our church attendance only lasted about three months. As it turned out, we weren’t going for my personal salvation, but rather as a prerequisite for marital counseling for my parents. When that didn’t work we stopped going to church.

After the divorce, my father became a Baptist.

The next summer, sitting in a dry creekbed in the woods in the middle of nowhere, Kevin and I were beating the crap out of some rocks.

“This is my church, you know what I mean?” Kevin said. We had never really talked much about our dad’s born-again-ness, but I thought that might be what he meant.
I Took the Wrong Bus to Paradise

by Crystal Maness

High beam. Low beam. High beam. It was pitch black; I could see the glow of the instrument panel and the unsteady path of the headlights from my seat behind the driver. The dicky-click of the lights should have lulled me into the deep sleep that had already overtaken all the others. It didn’t. It only made my nerves prickle and bunch in my shoulders and neck.

I was in Mexico; they did things differently here. The flash of the lights was to warn an oncoming bus or, even worse, a freight truck, that we were rounding a corner of the mountain. Sometimes, we saw light and then darkness in return. This signal meant — we won’t slow down, so you stop. Sometimes, the drivers warn an oncoming bus or, even worse, a freight truck, that we were rounding a corner. Sometimes, he would have to reverse the bus so that finally the victor could pass by. But we had the upper hand. For this leg of the journey, we had the inside; we hugged the strong mountain on each turn.

Believing in the riches of herbs, I had taken a valerian capsule, a natural sleep aid. It didn’t work, and neither had the muscle-relaxer, the Aleve, nor did the Dramamine that I had taken later. Every swerve made my stomach churn and lurch. My head and hands ached from the tension. I had the feeling that comes with the most suspenseful part of a good movie, except the climax was seven hours long.

I was headed for Mazatlan, a beach-side paradise on the Pacific. I knew that I would have to cross a mountain range, the Sierra Madre Occidental. I had imagined something like the drive to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, that I had traveled many times as a child — two-lane roads painted so that each driver would know his territory and guard-rails that I had always believed would catch our car like an acrobat’s safety net if my dad ever rounded a curve too fast.

I had imagined a peaceful countryside drive and a beautiful view. That was also the idea I had painted for my cousin, Tish, whom I had persuaded to come. All I could see if I sat as high as possible in my seat and strained my eyes was an inky blackness that slid down jutting rocks all the way to nowhere. I had promised her an adventure, and now, I was afraid that I would get it.

I had made a similar trip last summer over the same mountain range. I suppose I had forgotten how terrifying it was. Last summer I had been in a first-class seat beside my boyfriend. Maybe it was the romance that made me forget the details. Maybe I hadn’t even noticed the details. This summer I was seated beside my cousin on a second-class bus. She provided no strong hand to grasp with each plunging curve. Her hands held to the armrest with tight, white knuckles. The difference between first class and second: comfort and safety. The first-class bus driver rotated shifts; the second had only one driver.

When the bus station attendant said, “no hay primero clase. Esta llena.” I reassured Tish that although all the first-class buses were filled, second class couldn’t be that bad. “We’re not poofy,” I said, but my imagination was filled with flashbacks from movies: chicken coops, goats, and peasants from villages that didn’t believe in American hygiene. I had my doubts, but the tickets were cheap; we would never have this chance again.

When we arrived at the bus station, we were blonde stars. There are not many Americans in Durango, Mexico, where my parents live, but there are simply no young, blonde American girls who travel by bus in Durango. We showed the workers at the gate our tickets. There are absolutely no young, blonde American girls who travel second-class across a deadly mountain range alone. Their disbelief made me doubt my own decision.

We stood at Gate 22 surrounded by our luggage bought from Sears and Service Merchandise while locals brought garbage bags and cardboard boxes of belongings. The bus pulled up, putrid green and old. Tish squeezed my hand and smiled at several young Mexican boys who tipped their hats at us like true gentlemen as they walked by. We boarded.

There were no chickens in sight — at least not for now — no TV screens for movies, no bathroom. We had the first seat behind the driver. I felt reassured that I could see the driver and the road from my seat. Tish and I arranged ourselves for sleep. It was 12:30 a.m. We would arrive in Mazatlan around 9 a.m. after eight hours of sleep and run out to the beach energetically for a morning swim.

The bus pulled away. Durango was quiet and dark. The driver stopped for cigarettes at a gas station as if he were taking a road trip with his friends instead of driving a bus full of strangers. He began to chain-smoke immediately. We left the city surrounded by mountains quickly and quietly. The road became darker, and I tried harder to see the view, to see safety, to see the bottom of the cliffs.

The bus began to swerve and veer in a sickening manner I took a Dramamine. The bus driver stopped when and where he wanted; no one seemed surprised. Once, we stopped in the middle of the woods, and the driver stepped off. He was perched quietly — fears, funny childhood memories, plans for Mazatlan. We hoped that words would make the night and the trip pass more quickly. I watched the road ahead as we talked.

“Tish, is he nodding off? Watch him.”

The cigarette fell out the window from his limp hand where it had been perched. I sneezed loudly, purposely. He jumped, startled. We continued to watch
in fear as time after time his head lolled uncontrolled. I would talk louder or kick his seat right in the small of his back. Each time he would rouse and groggily stare at the road ahead hypnotized.

"Crystal, talk to him. Now."
"What! What do I say?"
"ANYTHING."

I got up from my seat. "Cuánto tiempo más, señor?"
He started turning to me with sleepy eyes. "Cuatro horas," he replied in a scratchy voice.

"Well," I said returning to my seat delirious with exhaustion and fear, "only four more hours."

"What, talk to him. Tell him anything."

I was afraid — afraid to sit silent, afraid to talk. I was not fluent, not even close. A Mexican boy sat across the aisle. I had noticed him staring at us when he wasn't sleeping restlessly. I made my decision and shook him awake. He awoke surprised and then scared to see my white, alarmed face. I tried to explain what was happening tripping over pronunciations and conjugations. I tried to tell him to talk to the driver to keep him awake. He whispered and returned to his seat. The driver glared annoyed over his shoulder at us. I suppose the combination of broken Spanish and a bad accent sounded like the ramblings of a lunatic. I sat back in my seat frustrated and waited watching the driver, willing him to stay awake.

We approached a straight stretch that was lined on both sides by trees, almost as good as guardrails. The bus slowed to 15 kph. We were headed toward the left lane. "SEÑOR, tiene familia?" I screamed quietly, jumping up, starting toward him, trying not to wake the other passengers who still slept soundly, ignorant of their jeopardy.

The driver, Jose, has a wife and two sons. He wants a girl soon. He is from Monterey. He wants to learn English. He was surprised to see two young, blonde Americans on his second-class bus route. He will arrive in Mazatlan, sleep five hours, and drive another bus back to Durango. It will be daylight, but he says that it is safer to drive in the dark when the headlights work like warning signals. He knows everything about me that I know how to say in Spanish.

At the break of day around 7 a.m., I left my place beside him on the stoop and returned to my seat. We were coming into flatter, safer land. My tongue was thick — my brain thicker — from talking all night in a foreign tongue. He continued to nod off and swerve, but I was exhausted, and there was ground on either side of the road for miles; we would only bruise from an accident now, not die. I closed my eyes. I could smell the ocean.

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The Dream

The dragon's lair opens its mouth to me
And I walk in with ease.
The Satyr and his sons peer into my eyes
As they stomp their bony hooves into the silted sand.
The Styx is not far up ahead,
For I see the blood-like water trickle
Between the cracks of the cave on my left and right.
The sound of the croaking frogs
Engulfs my ears and my mind is gone astray
From my tiresome journeying.

Perhaps Euripides or Aeschylus will hear my gentle footsteps
As my path widens to that of the vein.
Dionysus senses my arrival,
Graciously preparing a chalice of deep crimson wine,
A platter of grapes plucked from the vines of Athens
In my honor.

Aphrodite has awaited the end of my crusade
I approach her throne and kneel with lyric emotions
Streaming from my brain.

The sound of the flute traps my attention, there
Pan spits quarter notes into the air.
The festival has begun!

— Carey Harrison
A Merry-Go-Round

The music plays, Isabelle. Your eyes laughing, circle into magic loops of mermaids, peacocks and white time. Mine pinch the line of sand in the hourglass, but the organ keeps playing.

Will you choose the mermaid? Follow her wild from the tide on an up-stream whim? Will the bedrock’s rim scrape your thin white skin and scatter halo’s fragile shards among ancient roots beside the water’s route that carries salmon wearing sequins from a rainbow’s end? Or will you choose to ride the peacock, who is Narcissus by birth, and looks back at its own fan of layered eyes without giving worth to another’s smiles? Will you loop into this iridescent horizon, and be hypnotized by colors reflecting back from the sky?

Oh Isabelle, you stopped the music in your white time.

— Patricia Robinson

Paroled from Plato’s Cave

I consider the lilies of the field toiling. They spin the sorcery of Paradise, scents more heady than wine intoxicating my flesh — passing life into life. If I stay on the road, I will not notice yesterday’s flowering, untouched by a Saviour’s hand convulsing into ruin, But, I step off to touch the hollyhock’s display of petticoats on pink and purple crepe and see that the Cinderella hour is marked by serial killers, feasting on their leaves, veins thin as hair falling touched to the ground.

— Patricia Robinson

The Black Widow in Eden

It’s a black dress, too tight to close that seals around the scarlet self, a circle left for none to see beneath a fragile frame. It’s the death mark written in skin, an epic tale, a ballad; The sweet rose wraps ‘round the briar and the “Tree of Life” grows wild in time, by falling rocks and coyote trails. But, the crimson spot is a flaming sword that keeps the way of the “Tree of Death.”

— Patricia Robinson

“Untitled”
From Here to There and Returning

God said, "Let there be," before there was. Images first, and afterward, earth full formed, a storm carries Spider Wort and Surprise Lilies from the herb garden to the fence row. I saw them from the new ground where I dug to plant fall potatoes. They were purple and pink, shaped tenderly, growing on sturdy stems woven through thick clumps of fescue beneath towering blackberry vines. The Spider Wort has leaves, the Lily none "whose seed was in itself after his kind," and God saw that it was good," on the third day, before time, where the drawing board held its listing of all there is: a Father's son, a mother's child, a widow's tears, and the hungry.

— Patricia Robinson

Facets of Red

by Holly R. Dotson

Her husband had gotten her pregnant and left again, but this was fine with Gertha Yarber; she had become accustomed to his actions, gotten used to his tendencies. Growing up poor in a large family had made her strong, and heartache was the one thing she could expect in life, and this made her think she had some control. If she knew it was coming how bad could it be? But knowing didn't make it any easier. It didn't help her with the bills or the food or the clothes for her six other children. But there was comfort in knowing that he would leave — a strange kind of comfort, not the fluffy, everything's-all-right kind, but comfort all the same, and she took what she could get.

She worked in the cotton fields ten miles from her house, walking with one of the two youngest babies on either hip, a bulging mid-section, and a hundred-pound cotton sack and red-and-blue patch quilt draped over her shoulders. She would have left the children with a relative, but there wasn't one and she was still breast-feeding. There was no cow and no extra money for milk, so this was life.

The color red has been a part of the English language since about A.D. 900 and was found in the lore of ancient societies. For centuries the vigorous color has been the symbol of health and life. The ancient Chinese wore the red ruby to promote a long and prosperous existence.

My grandmother, Pauline Ruby Morton, was twelve when her mother died. She had ovarian and breast cancer — disease that plagued the women of her family. Pauline’s father divided the chores among his nine children, knowing no other way to raise them and keep his farm running smoothly. The four oldest boys worked beside him in the fields. The two oldest girls tended to the livestock, and the two youngest girls cooked, cleaned the house and took care of their baby brother. There was a stool built for Pauline and Margaret, her sister and helpmate, so they could reach the stove, and a ladder so they could put the jars of food they canned on the shelves in the pantry.

Poverty never touched the door of their home. Her father thanked the good Lord on their regular visits to church — twice a week to the Presbyterian Church and once a week to the Baptist Church. He was stern with his children. They lived by a rigid schedule and strict rules. He made sure they grew up right and fast, but they did not know the difference — it was all they ever knew.

I was getting my ultrasound — same time as last year. There was a different lady telling me to lie back and propping my feet up with the motorized foot lever on the papered examining table, but the procedure was the same. I felt the
warm jelly substance as she squirted it on my abdomen, and knew that soon my husband and I would be seeing our new addition floating around in my belly.

The nurse's red sweater flamed in my retina. She placed the ultrasound equipment on my stomach and began the moving it in circles. A tiny body squirmed about under the pressure.

"Is this your first?" she asked.

"No, we have an eight-month-old daughter," I said with a smile.

"My, my. You'll have your hands full. Oh, but these will be the best times of your life. My husband and I had our two close together. They were fifteen months apart."

"It will have its advantages," I said. "If we had waited five years to have our second one like we had planned, Gracie would be in the first grade and we'd be starting all over again. This way we won't have to put all the baby things up." I was talking fast, trying not to think about my full bladder.

We were all still staring at the gray screen with the tiny gray figure still bopping across it. The small talk continued as she showed us the legs and arms and thumb-sucking face.

"Would you like to know the sex?" she asked still moving the ball over my round mid-section.

"Yes," Gent and I said together.

After a few minutes, the little figure unfolded its crossed limbs to reveal to us all its God-given glory.

"It's a boy!" she gleefully said.

"Oh, that's wonderful," I exclaimed.

"All right, now we have our family finished," Gent said, smiling.

During the Middle Ages, the English associated red with the blood of battle, which led to it symbolizing courage and strength. In *Colors and Colors*, Luckiesh says that red was the prominent color in the dress and decorations of warfare and many civilizations used the red flag as their marker for entering battle. Crusaders stitched a red cloth cross to the front of their cloaks as a public display of their commitment to the "cause of the cross" before they began their journey. A similar cross would be sewn to the back of their garments upon returning as a statement of the spiritual and temporal rewards their courage brought them. It was also the superstition of the early French that the bloodstone, the birthstone for the month of March, would bring courage to those who wore it.

"It takes courage to live," my great-grandmother, Gertha, said to me as she pulled turnips from her garden.

Her face flushed red with each strain. Her simple words perplexed the 8-year-old standing next to her in the August heat, but she said them over and over again. I thought it was a sign of her old age, but now I know she was making sure I got it. It was one of many phrases she would pound into my head during my visits to her trailer. She believed the young should learn from the old. "That's how it was done in my time," she would say, "Didn't have no proper schooling — just that of common sense and the lessons life wanted to throw in there. But it takes courage to live; remember that."

She said that every time I visited her at her trailer until she checked herself into a nursing home at the age of ninety-six. Courage was still in her. She left the only life she had known since the turn of the century — left her garden to be harvested by someone else, her back yard to be swept by a new tenant, left all her can goods stacked neatly in her pantry, and started new. Her children tried to stop her, but she was like a mule, once she decided on one way, there was no turning back. Stubbornness came natural to her; it was the fuel for her courage, and it was the excuse the nursing home used to put her on sedatives.

"She's too unruly," the head RN said when we asked what had happened to our sharp grandmother. But she was right — Gertha Yarber was to be ruled by no one if she could help it. She was in control of her life, always had been, and would tell anyone "the way it was" if they tried to change that. Every drop of blood would rush to her face and she would begin praising the way only a woman in her nineties could. She had the courage to live to be one hundred and one years old.

The courtroom was filled with spectators, and every eye was turned to Pauline Morton Kurkeyndall as she walked her eight-months-pregnant figure up to the stand. Her eyes scanned the room before her. There next to her sister-in-law, sat three tiny girls in their red velvet Christmas dresses Pauline had made. She smiled at her girls, and they — without knowing — gave her strength. She had taken the stand to testify against the man who'd shot and killed her husband in the sunlight of her front yard, even though the man had strongly advised her not to.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" the officer asked holding the black leather-bound Bible under her tiny shaking hand.

"Yes," her voice quivered.

And she did. She told how she heard the gunshot ring through her kitchen window and ran outside, still in her housecoat and slippers, and saw the man standing over her husband with gun in hand. She could see his breath as he stumbled, drunk and cursing, to his car and drove off. There was no mistake. He was the man who killed her Hollis. She knew his face. He had been over to their house with his wife many times for dinner — a supposed friend. But he had gotten drunk and shot the gun in anger, and now she had to face the future with-
out a husband. His threats of what he would do if she testified seemed frail against that truth, so she told all she knew. But he didn’t get convicted. There was enough money to change the mind of one juror.

She had her baby, and stayed in her house just three miles down from the man who stole her life, and she raised her four children by herself — never remarrying until they were all grown, out of fear the man she chose would not treat them as his own.

Life is red, a fire that keeps us warm and burns us in the process. To stand close to the flames takes courage. But that is where the most heat is.

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**Moon**

Gleaming satellite
cast your beam on naked
trees and fields of sleeping
snow, making them more
than what they seem —

grander than they are.
Reflect your steel glow
from the blackboard roofs,
and bounce it off windows
framed in lights of icicles,
cauing all who pass in these
streets tonight to know you
are the daughter of twilight.
Your father is the sky —
your mother the dark earth.

— Holly R. Dotson

**Outside My Apartment at 3:30 a.m. After the Argument**

Magic is pecan
leaves raining
yellow crinkles
around your feet

cising all
is asleep
except you
and your pain,
and the silver
fox trotting
through your
asphalt world.

— Holly R. Dotson
Watching People Pass in the Park

Red is rancorous. Mad as a hatter.

Blue is honest childhood sky.

Yellow is striking summer birthdays.

Green is jealous. Makes errors and stumbles.

Pink is soft. Infant daughters and baby blankets.

— Kristi Richardson
Sonnet Sequence for Paul

we spend
the
end,
but
you
cut
through
such
dreams.
touch
me.
sleep
deep.

surreal
edged plans,
I feel
warm hands
romance
me. your
eyes dance.
tender
stars fall;
our moon
will call
us soon.
love holds
night's folds.

moments fly.
gentle sweat,
passion high,
fingers met.
dream come true.
lips of mine
and yours, too,
intertwine.
hour runs late.
tenderly
suffocate
only me.
burning sighs
stop the time.

— Amanda Crocker

"J.R.'s Place"

Linda Guy
Merit Award
For a Boy on Becoming a Marksman

Practice. Raise your aim just high enough to hit a dead target. Pull the trigger. Let the pressure escape into the calm air. Do this over and over until you feel numb. Hold your breath and don’t let your heartbeat disturb the focus. When your pulse slows and your mind empties, raise the sight into the black bird sitting on the oak limb. When his eye looks down the barrel, pull the trigger. Watch the steel world that rolled in your fingers disappear into the pitch. Watch him rise and fall into the tall grass; his breathless wings showering the ground with ripe seed.

— Greg Smith
High School Winners
2001 Writers' Festival Writing Contest Winners

Essay Division

1st place
Pia Gannis - “Grandmother’s Garden” - Bradshaw High School
Darlene Montgomery, sponsor

2nd Place
Ryan Lee - “Hog Farming 101 with Murphy Lee” - East Lawrence High School
Phyliss Lemay, sponsor

Poetry Division

1st Place
John MacLachlan - “Keeps Going” - Bradshaw High School
Darlene Montgomery, sponsor

2nd Place
Jackie Richardson - “Sidewalk Beggar” - Bradshaw High School
Darlene Montgomery, sponsor

Short Story Division

1st Place
Steven McCrary - “The Peddler’s Tale” - Bradshaw High School
Darlene Montgomery, sponsor

2nd Place
Elizabeth Hoekenga - “Sweet Tea” - Bradshaw High School
Darlene Montgomery, sponsor

Our featured writers this year are:
Tony Early—Fictionalist
Philip Dacey—Poet
Michael Martone—Creative Nonfiction

Contributors' Notes

Amanda Crocker, a senior from Cherokee, is majoring in Professional Writing with a minor in Spanish.

Holly R. Dotson is from Corinth, Mississippi.

Carey Charlene Harrison, a freshman from Red Bay, majoring in English Literature, “is hopeful that this piece (The Dream) will allow the reader to experience the essence of life and the search for truth in the eyes of our ancient past.”

Brian Mitchell Lindsey, of Florence, is pursuing his Master of Arts degree in English. He was published in the 1999 edition of Lights and Shadows and is the 2001 Ferry Scholarship recipient. “I love to read; writing helps me focus on what I read.”

Crystal Maness is a senior from Saltillo, Tennessee. She is seeking a degree in English and Spanish. “I really enjoy being able to put my life onto paper because I never want to forget this trip.”

Kory Martin lives in Florence.

Elizabeth Mulder, a junior from Athens, is pursuing a double major in Public Relations and Professional Writing with a minor in Journalism. “Writing is a real passion of mine, and my ultimate goal is to one day write novels, either fiction or creative non-fiction.”

Kristi Richardson lives in Florence.

Patricia Robinson lives in Florence.

Greg Smith is majoring in English.