



**2006
Valley Voices
Writing Contest Winners**

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Poetry Winner -- Adult

RAIN

by Rachel Johnson

I never quite understood why my mother
Would sometimes buy a long green and
White carton of filtered cigarettes.
Our old man never smoked in
Front of us, but for years would
Slip behind the machine shed where he
Flicked the remains of a hundred
Brown paper ashy filtered ends.

From a field's edge I thought I saw him
Take a drag as he rumbled under the
Big yellow umbrella that shaded his left
Shoulder after he turned the Oliver
Back around for another swath. But by the
Time he pulled up to the old Dodge, no remnants of
Smoke or ash or crushed pack could be found,
Perhaps lost among the grain and stubble.

Once or twice after I had grown I
Spied him quickly snuffing out a butt
As he caught sight of me entering old
Dan's Café. He had come then to meet his old
Cronies there daily, and I hoped to palm
A coke, a cheeseburger and fries. He would
Slip the ash tray behind the sugar
And pretend it belonged to someone else.

The doctor did not let up, kept asking to know
How many drags, how many sticks, now many packs
He enjoyed every day, and I watched my sister gasp
At the revelation. I, too stunned to sputter,
Rationalized it was his namesake's death that added
More than the occasional reprieve for the stolen quiet
Of gray wisps circling off his wrist as he would hold
One low. But it was not the smokes that wore him out.
But come rain he would stand at the granary
Door and quietly smoke a stick or two, its wafting
Flavor muted by the falling drenching kindness.
Trapped by the freedom it brought he would watch
It fall mudding the fields, filling the creeks.
He did not mind my watching him then.
He did not mind me then.
He did not mind anything then.

Fiction Winner -- Adult

THINK OF ME

by Marjorie Gentry

For two days after you left me and went to New Orleans, I sat on the river bank and cried. My eyes got red. My whole face swelled up.

Once I bent over to look into the river. Two tears fell, drip, drop, into the current.

I thought maybe those two tears would flow down the Solomon, into the Smoky, into the Kaw, the Missouri, and right down to the Mississippi.

One day you might be taking a shower and those tears would hit you on your chest where your heart is. You'd think of me. You'd rush to pack your suitcase, rev up that ol' pick-up and come back home to me.

The river was rushing, but I thought I could just get to the quarry bridge in time to see those teardrops go by.

I got there in time but an irrigator was pumpin' right below the bridge. Now I don't know if my tears went to New Orleans OR onto that milo field.

I watched the milo grow. You didn't come back.

The milo was harvested. You didn't come back.

The milo was fed to the feedlot cows. You didn't come back.

The cows went to market. You didn't come back.

The next time you order a filet mignon at one of those fancy restaurants and you get a piece of gristle you can neither chew nor swallow. Think of me.

Essay -- Adult

MY BEAUTIFUL BLACK AND WHITE COWS

by Avalon B. Melton

The early sounds of morning are intriguing. Upon leaving the house, I hear frogs croaking along the creek and crickets chirping. Our dog Ralphie stretches and silently follows me to the dairy barn. The screen door creaks when I open it, and my boots make hollow sounds on the concrete floor. The knob grates past the notches as I turn it for the sanitizing cycle until the water gushes out to start filling the wash vat. The chlorine glubs out of the jug and into the water.

I click on the flashlight. My steps are muffled as I start up the hill to bring in the dairy cows. The eerie yelp of coyotes across the creek is startling; then the neighbor's dog barks in answer. Sometimes I have had a coyote lie on the hillside watching the activity. I don't bother it; it doesn't bother me. The sounds of birds cheeping in the trees can be heard, and the wind comes sighing as it moves along the valley.

My voice sounds loud in the quiet dawn as I call to the cows to get up. Ann grunts as she lumbers to her feet. Monica snorts, reluctant to move as she slowly starts down the hill. I hear Jan's knees creak when she struggles to get up. Trilby lows to her newborn calf to follow her to the barn. The calf bawls its objection to having breakfast interrupted.

I am sentimental about my beautiful black and white Holstein cows. I don't mind patting them on their firm hard backs to urge them forward. If one is stubborn, a twist of the long slender tail may be necessary. Some want to be pushed along.

Fresca nudges me until I take the time to rub behind her floppy ears or under her droopy chin. She likes for me to stroke her silky neck and talk to her. She is also one that will allow the grandchildren to sit on her back for a short length of time.

There are two young heifers that are gentle enough to walk up to you while out in the pasture. They are wanting to be rubbed and petted. You do have to watch, though, because they will bunt you with their hard heads if you do not give them enough attention. They were 4-H calves so grew up being petted.

We wash our cows with warm water once they are in the milking parlor. In the winter their udders are cold and sometimes muddy. I prefer the summertime when they are warm and usually clean. We wash them mostly for the stimulation then.

A cow can be identified by her udder as easily as the number on her neck chain. Some have udders that are round and firm, while an older cow's udder will become pendulous and flabby.

Landis, our faithful nurse cow, waits to be let in with her babies. She gladly receives any calf we put with her. She was falling in the milk barn due to having to go up steps into the stanchions, so I tried (with success) putting her with baby calves. She would allow four calves to nurse at the same time. When a new calf was born, I would move the oldest to the calf shed, and she would gladly accept the new addition.

The dairy business is interesting, time consuming, confining but profitable. It takes a certain type of person to handle dairy cows.

Autobiography Winner -- Adult

MONDAY MORNING WITH MOTHER

by Marjorie Gentry

"This is the way we wash our clothes, wash our clothes, wash our clothes. This is the way we wash our clothes. All on a Monday morning."

The words of this old children's song remind me of the days before automatic washers. Back then, Monday morning was the start of wash day. Although my mother was not your conventional wife of the 1930s and 1940s, this is one convention she followed religiously. She did her washing every Monday morning.

And I, her only daughter, loved wash day. As soon as I was old enough to climb upon a chair, I wanted to help. I imagine my early years of help were just splashing in the water and asking questions. I also think I probably entertained Mother with a few songs and a dance or two. (I was always such a ham.)

By the time I was five or six, I was really able to help. I'd help sort the clothes and hand Mother what she wanted.

We were lucky. We had a water heater. We didn't have to heat water in boilers on the stove. Mother had a horror of this as she had lost a little sister who pulled a boiler of water on herself. Or fell in. I never got the story straight.

So the first job on Monday morning belonged to Dad. He'd light the hot water heater and then always caution Mother to remember to turn it off. Hot water heaters were known to blow up in those days.

While the water was heating, Mother would fix breakfast, gather the clothes from the hampers, strip her bed, fill the rinse tubs, and generally do her morning chores. Usually by the time I got up, the washer and tubs would be filled. I would hurry to eat my breakfast so that I could help Mother. (I have always loved anything that involves water. Except for doing dishes. I hated to do dishes. I still do.)

When the washer and tubs were filled, Mother scraped slivers of Ivory Soap into the washer. The first load was dish towels, dish cloths, and white table cloths. If they were stained, she soaked these items in chlorine bleach. We put all these white items in the first wash. The hot water and the bleach were supposed to sterilize them.

Then Mother turned on the machine. Having never lived in a time or place where there was no electricity, I took this miracle for granted. But it always seemed like Mother heaved a sigh of satisfaction. She remembered the days of helping her mother do the laundry so she felt blessed. After a short time, we would stick a broom handle into the washer and pull out one item to see if it was clean enough. These kitchen items had to be sparkling white.

After Mother judged them clean enough, I would beg to run them through the wringer. Since this load was so hot, we'd have to fish for those clothes with the stick and then stuff them into the wringer without touching them. As they dropped into the cold rinse

water, steam would start rising from the tub. This rinse had bluing in it to make the clothes look extra white. When I was little and I'd ask to run the clothes through the wringer, I would always be reminded of the little girl up the street who got her arm caught in the wringer and her arm never grew right after that.

Then it was time to slosh the cloths up and down in the rinse water. I never minded getting wet. That was half the fun.

Usually by this time on school days, I would have to leave for school. In spring and fall when I'd come home for lunch, the clothes line would be full of clothes. Towels, sheets, Dad's white shirts, my pajamas, and Bob's jeans would be flapping in the wind. Mother was a very modest woman so she would hang the underwear on the line that was between the sheets and towels. I'd usually have time before I had to go back to school to take some of the clothes off the line for Mother. I loved the smell of clothes that have been warmed by the sun and dried by the wind. (I still do.)

Summertime was the best time as I could help Mother with the whole wash. The clothes dried fast and we were usually done by noon.

I learned the whole process in the summer. First, you washed the kitchen stuff. Then the sheets, then towels, and then Dad's white shirts. Next the light colored clothes were washed, followed by the brights. The blue jeans, overalls, and socks were washed next to last. Last were the rugs and rags. By the time the jeans landed in the water, the water was yukky. That's one facet of modern-day washing I appreciate. I don't have to stick my hands in slimy water.

When I was little, I would follow Mother out to the clothes line and my job was to hand her the clothes out of the basket. When I got older, I would be the one who hung the clothes on the line. As I was hanging the last load on the line, Mother would be draining the washer and the rinse tubs. In spring, summer, and fall, she would water the flower beds with the used rinse water.

In winter, how funny the shirts and long johns looked when they were frozen to the line. When evening drew near, we'd take these frozen clothes into the house and let them dry near the stove. How comical I must have looked carrying long underwear that was frozen hard as a board.

We always had ham and beans on Monday. Once when I was older, I asked her why we always had ham and beans on wash day. She almost looked startled. Then she answered, "Because my mother always had ham and beans on Monday."

She paused and then said, "And that was because she had the stove heated up and had to keep it going to heat the water. The beans cooked on the back of the stove."

I wished I had never asked. We didn't have ham and beans for the next few Mondays. I loved ham and beans. Mother had broken with tradition. We finally had to beg for ham and beans.

That was wash day when I was a kid and actually that's the way I washed until my very modern husband bought me an automatic washer and dryer after our first son was born. I don't hang my clothes out anymore, but soft, clean towels always remind me of Monday morning with Mother.