



**2007
Valley Voices
Writing Contest Winners**

To Learn More about our annual
contest visit our website at
www.hwy24.org

Scroll Down to View All Winners

Poetry Winner -- Youth

WACONDA

by **JORDAN FLOWER**

Yes, I'm her; the one who faced pain.
The one whose name is one of your current lakes.
I faced fear. Oh, I faced fear a lot.
Seeing the killing of a flying bowstring shot.
I dive in after him, but he is not near.
I just lost a soon-to-be husband dear.
I never thought it was that bad until I saw the bloody
killer was my so-called dad.
I shall wish for him to be here right by my side,
But he will never come back, not even to say good-bye.
Like a big hit in my heart, my soul is released as I drop
down to my soon-to-be bone knees.
Fearless now, I've been through a lot.
Now I'm done. This story has to stop.
I'll say farewell as a dependent friend.
I'll always be here until the end.

Poetry Winner -- Adult

**FOR MY FATHER
AFTER SELLING HIS CATTLE**

by **LORA K. REITER**

Out of the grey dawn,
A grey bird,
Blue,
As the sun rose
To make colors rise
Out of pasture,
Out of bird,
A heron,
Stranger strangely standing
By the corral
This morning after the cattle.
Great blue catcher of fishes,
Water bird,
Silently pausing by the silent lot,
He marks the utter change.

Fiction Winner -- Adult

VESTA

by **MARY WILLIAMSON LAVY**

THE afternoon light filtered through a cloudy haze. The first snow of the season falling and the children sleeping after lunch and story time, the peace of the afternoon overwhelmed her. She rose from her porcelain-wheeled rocker and noiselessly crossed the room to gaze out the window.

She was 12 when her father died. He had served four enlistments with Lincoln's Militia before being honorably discharged. He was awarded land on the frontier for bravery of service. She could barely remember his face. Her mother had loved him so.

The back door opened and her heart stopped. Why was he coming in so early? The children were sleeping and this time was her only time. She crossed the room quickly and sank down in her chair pulling her shawl close and covering her legs with the lap robe made for her by her mother.

She could hear him taking off his boots and coat. Her heart was pounding. She knew he would look for her and the children were sleeping. He came to the door of her room, looked down at the children and crossed the room to stand in front of her. He knelt to bring himself to eye-level with the smallness of her seated form.

"Have you tried to walk today?" She looked at him, huge man that he was, and, slowly, shook her head. He reached for her, lifting her small frame from the chair.

"If we just try a step or two every day, maybe you will get well." He lowered her feet to the floor and she had no legs for standing. He lifted her several times and each time her legs were gone. Her heart was racing and the children were sleeping.

He sat her back down in the chair. He pushed her chair through the door into the parlor closing the door behind him. He put a log on the fire in the Franklin stove and turned, again, to face her.

"It's been three years. Three long years." She nodded but spoke nothing. Her hands twisted her embroidered handkerchief into a tight knot.

She said, "I can't. I just can't. Don't ask me."

"Three years. What's a man to do?" She looked at him and remembered how she had loved him on her wedding day. Her wedding day, right here in this house built by his father on the western most edge of the open prairie. Neighbors came from miles around to celebrate the beginning of a new family.

Then, less than a year later, the child was born; a girl. Such a terrible night; lightning and thunder and terrible white-hot, pulsing, unending pain. Finally, she could no longer scream. She could no longer weep. She could no longer fight this awful war of body and soul. The child was born. The thin, keening cry of the newborn pierced her consciousness.

She woke and there, beside her, lay the child. She gathered the infant to her breast and thanked her God for his mercy.

Too soon, he was at her bed and she could not refuse. The land was lonely and empty. They had each other and now a child. In the next short year, the second child was born. She remembered the agony of the first time and knew, in her heart, it would be worse. She wondered if she would die. Again, the next year, another child.

She could not walk. She could not rise to her feet. No matter how hard she tried, she could not stand. She pushed and pulled herself through the house in her little wheeled rocking chair. She read stories, wrote letters and tended her children.

He came to her now and again. "Please, it's been three years. What am I to do?" She looked at him, remembered how much she had loved him and slowly shook her head.

"I can't walk."

He got to his feet and went to the back room. He put on his boots and coat. She heard the back door close. She would live.

She listened to the silence for a long time; he was not returning. She rose again from her chair. The children were sleeping and she watched them. She remembered another gray and wintry afternoon. Her little sister was sleeping, as they were, peacefully unaware that she would be leaving with the visiting strangers the next day. She remembered her mother's agony at the parting; the silent scream of farewell as the carriage faded from view.

She startled from her memories. She felt the eyes of the child upon her. She did not look. In one smooth motion, she moved back to her chair, still in the parlor, and covered herself as before.

She rolled her chair into her room and into its customary place. She looked across the room and beckoned the child to her.

Essay Winner -- Adult

DARWIN, GOD, AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

by LORA K. REITER

MY firmest resolutions to the contrary, I can't keep silent any longer about the endless and—from my perspective—pointless discussion which keeps eye-brows raised when the "Kansas Board of Education" is mentioned—and rarely fails to engender comments about tornadoes, Oz, and Toto. I'm not very encouraged to read that school boards and other folks in places like Connecticut are also engaged in the debate. My provinciality and irony direct me to consider that east-coasters should know better. That's just the reverse of their own provinciality, I know, which, as one New Yorker cover suggested, directs them to consider that New York is the center of the universe, bordered somewhere out west by Kansas, which is, in turn, bordered somewhere farther out west by Japan. . . . Everyone can lay claim to cultural parochialism. I only wish we Kansans could ease off a bit. "Kansas is as big as you think," our new state motto, is one unintentionally wry example of our near-sightedness. I'm not comforted to read that we're not myopically alone in this evolution/creation/intelligent design business.

I admit, from the outset, to my own bias about religion's place in the state. I think one's right to worship or believe according to one's own lights should be a matter of law, a fundamental civil right. But—I will offend many immediately, I know—I think that guarantee is the extent of the state's responsibility or role, and I think "church" and "state" should be separate in every other way.

Relative to public education, this means to me that public elementary and secondary schools have the civil and moral responsibility to instruct our youngsters in all matters necessary to provide them one, nationally-consistent base from which they may enter society as worker and citizen. Our educational system must, by way of beginning, offer students every affordable opportunity to learn how to gain, process, and express information—what we've long called the 3 Rs, the basics, as it were. (In my judgment, that needs to include cultural staples such as music and art.) Then, as we become increasingly complex, socially, we must afford our students other opportunities: drivers' education, for instance, or computer technology, or, in many areas, English as a second language. Next, we have to help those who are able and/or willing learn a different kind of basic: how to raise questions and form insights into what they know about.

Science? Creationism and intelligent design? What about those? How do they figure into this mix?

They absolutely should be taught, and in every public school our tax dollars support.

Students need to know the shape and processes of the physical world. They should know about the formation of the earth and the changes the earth is constantly experiencing—both those which are natural such as the drift of the continents or the timing of the seasons or the causes of storms or the shifting of the tectonic plates, AND those which result from humans' use of the earth: the pollution of our waters, the reduction of natural resources, the elimination of species, and the warming of the planet.

Other science?

Some sense of the biological and botanical (and their interdependence) is critical, especially now, when so many of us live so separately from nature that parks and petting zoos are as close as lots of children get to reality that's not "virtual." And for those so inclined, astronomy and physics and chemistry must be available in order that some may begin to explore the macro and micro universes, those formidable bases for extraordinary questions and insights into our being.

Evolutionary theory? Of course. It is the basis and substance of much of what we know about the natural world. Not to teach Darwin's insights and at least some of the applications scientists continuously make of them is tantamount to intellectual betrayal of those kept ignorant. It is now demonstrable that whales once walked on the land. Their vestigial legs are inside, quite apparent to the informed. It is also demonstrable that human fetal development includes a stage at which we have gills, and our tailbones are exactly that, a vestigial reminder of an appendage we no longer sport. Those of us with unusually long coccyges can only hope that our children's will continue to shorten—so as to cause less pain when they take a pratfall.

That evolutionary theory has gaps, that it does not yet answer all the questions we can pose it, does not alter the fact that it provides thousands of insights to questions we could not begin to answer before Darwin (and others) proposed and demonstrated it. Unless or until it is displaced or replaced as a rational explanation of what is observable in the natural world, it must be taught our children.

Religion and faith-based notions of the universe, including, of course, the origins of our earth and ourselves? Do these ideas have a place in public education?

Of course they do. In my opinion, we have made a terrible error in excluding the study of religion in our schools. Our spiritual selves are as important—and as diverse—as our physical and imaginative selves, more important to many. To suggest that that aspect of life should not be examined and discussed has always seemed the height of the irrational—and cowardly—to me.

Theology, theories about the nature of a supreme being and his or her purposes in creating us and the universe, is one of the most important expressions of human inquiry. Faith, the particular theory one ascribes to as one's belief, is one of the most important expressions of human feeling and understanding. Why such study should not be part of our school offerings simply baffles me.

But—and here's part of the rub—we should not suggest that matters of faith be taught in the same breath as matters of science—or drivers' education or literature. Intelligent design—which is synonymous with creationism—doesn't belong in the biology class any more than psychology belongs in the physics class. It is not a study based on observation and experimentation—the scientific method. It has no place in the science classroom.

What I suspect—and here is the rest of the rub—is that U. S. parents, school boards, and teachers, themselves, long accustomed to religious warfare rather than discussions of religion, avoid the subject to avoid the quandaries. We're not very civil about matters of belief. For the most part, we've learned to hold our tongues in the presence of "the enemy," but behind closed doors, as it were, some who profess Christianity still seem to suspect that Catholics have 666 tattoos, that Protestants would rather fight than think, that Jews are unbelieving usurers, and that Muslims are simply the infidel. Some of all persuasions don't even acknowledge Shinto or Hinduism as religions. And the poor humanist is despised by most. So we have, I judge, banned the study and discussion of religion from public schools in order to prevent those of one belief from having to confront those of other beliefs. It could make mothers' clubs a site for jihad. . . .

But I disagree with that perspective and that approach. I grant that "belief" is a matter of faith, not reason, so I affirm that, in public schools, no religion should be "taught" in the sense of "inculcated." Teachers may not be evangelicals for any faith. But I deny that "religion" cannot be discussed reasonably. Of course it can be. Theologians, philosophers, and scholars of all sorts have discussed it reasonably for centuries. Discussions can also occur among the less learned. They do! I talk about religion and religions a lot of the time. So do my friends—of various persuasions. What it takes is the security of knowing that such discussions are informational and rational, occasions for study, not occasions for witnessing or propagating an individual's faith. And I think such study is as important as knowledge of weather patterns or cellular structure or art history.

In one way, it may be more important. I am not a historian, but I agree with Santayana, the philosopher who said that those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it. Not long ago, I read commentaries suggesting that some historians consider that the next major confrontation between civilizations will be between evangelicals from Islam and Christendom. If we cannot understand what happened when Christians and Muslims had their first major go-round, we are surely condemned to consider that what's brewing now in the Middle East has no precedents or causes or explanations. And that would be a terrible error for us—and them. This has been festering for more than a thousand years. Perhaps it has already erupted. And we are no longer fighting with swords.

How can we understand? How can our children?

We must teach them. We must help them understand that God does not manifest Godself the same way to all people. We must help them see that those diverse manifestations are specifically related to particular cultures, to particular geographies. We must help them see that another's national pride, cultural preferences, and religious practices are as dear to them as our own are to us.

Our schools should not be in the business of indoctrination. They should be in the business of imparting the information—gathering and processing skills that are essential to the free citizen, that boy or girl grown to man or woman who can reason the way to insight and recognize that no mold ever has or ever will fit us all.

The more honest and precise we are about what we know and don't know, whether scientific theory or the nature of God, the more we will offer the best insights and assist in the best discussions and the more sturdy of mind and soul our children will become. We cannot be honest or precise if we blur distinctions or censor ideas or attempt false reconciliations of what we cannot, as of yet, unify.

For me, this means that theories of nature and theories of god are essential substance for public school classrooms—separate and equal classrooms. No school board or parent or teacher has, in my judgment, the right or the responsibility to insist that both kinds of theories be roughly screwed together in some poor science teacher's class. Their responsibility should be to insist that both science and world religions be as precisely and honestly addressed as is humanly possible in separate science and world religion classes.

What individuals conclude is a private matter. If some find faith and evolution compatible, that is their insight. If others do not, that is their insight. Either insight is the individual's personal right and decision. But neither should be taught.

Autobiography Winner -- Adult

VOICES IN THE CEMETERY

by **JOYCE KOOPS**

In commemoration of my Dutch Calvinist heritage

THE gate was made of black wrought iron. We walked through single file. My mother in her flowered jersey silk and sturdy shoes, Aunt Geraldine in fashion wedgies and matching skirt and slacks, and I in sandals and sun dress to show off my summer tan.

At the entrance, just inside the gate, impressive tombstones paid tribute to the rich and famous; the Lowells and the Cabots of our town. We knew their names, but we walked on by. We had not come to visit them.

Graveled paths like burlap ribbons meandered through the graveyard, making neighborhoods of graves. The path was wide enough for two. Mother and Aunt Geraldine walked ahead. I walked behind, privy to their comments and opinions.

We strolled and stopped, and strolled again, and as we did we read off names in the manner of a friendly nod or a tipping of the hat. Sometimes we reminisced; "How cold it was when Etta died!" And sometimes, like a front porch chat, we had a bit of gossip; "Remember how Gerard's ex-wife showed up at Henrietta's funeral, and no one knew where she should sit? It made a fuss," Aunt Geraldine said. Mother nodded. "Divorce," she said, "is always such a nuisance."

At my father's grave we were strangely silent. I could have held my mother's hand, or put my arm around her, but I didn't. It would have been like putting on a show. And if I said I loved my father it would have put us ill at ease. We never talked like that. So I stood and read his marker as if I had not seen the words before. Mother stooped to pull an errant weed. We turned then to Baby's grave. Dear Baby Brother, only three months old. I was five years when he died. I cried to have an angel on his gravestone.

We milled around the family plot speaking names and dates and memories. Pete and Mary, George and Sarah, Pier and Lidah, and Little Harriet with the long pipe curls, who, at the eight of eight, took sick and died in just a weekend. Aunt Geraldine said they were in third grade together. "I always wondered where she went," she said.

A glimpse of flowers drew us further. Minnie's grave. Minnie of the Ladies' Aid. Minnie, with a penchant for embroidery. Her grave, spread with plastic leaves and buds and pickets, looked like a fancy dresser scarf. Small white stones outlined it, an edging of crochet. "I declare," my mother said, "I believe she gets up at night to do up her own grave."

On the path again, our footsteps crunched against the gravel. We came to Veteran's Field; World War I. World War II. Korea. Viet Nam. There was no breeze. The little flags stood straight and still like soldiers at attention. Junior was buried there, the only son of Uncle John and Aunt Angelina. I pictured him in his World War II pilot's uniform, tall and blond and handsome.

In the old part of the cemetery a brown marbled stone brought childhood memories to my companions. Jan and Gerdena Hoffmeyer, it said. "Do you remember," Aunt Geraldine asked my mother, "how Grandma Hoffmeyer could laugh—bending over and slapping one knew with her hand? Grandpa never laughed at all."

Mother came to his defense. "He was too busy working," she said. "He left a farm to each of his five sons."

Nearby lay the grave of E. J. G. Boemendaal. "The Hoffmeyers and Bloemendaals were lifelong friends," said Aunt Geraldine. "They came to America together."

We'd come full circle. The Lowells and the Cabots beckoned at the gate. As we passed the tombstone named Moray, Aunt Geraldine stopped to tell a story. "When Mr. Moray died," she said, people asked, "How much did he leave? How much? How much?"

The question came to Mrs. Mottma of the Old Country. "Hoeveel?" she scoffed, "Hoeveel?" (How much? How much?) She answered her own question. "Alles" she said. (Everything.) We smiled at her wisdom.

"She is right," I thought. "We leave everything. But the grave cannot take everything. Memories live. Generations go on. Souls are praising God in Heaven in Jesus' name, amen."

I didn't say the words out loud. We never talked like that.