



**2008
Valley Voices
Writing Contest Winners**

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Poetry Winner -- Adult

THE PLAYGROUND

by Rachel Johnson

Not once do I recall
Envyin' dem city kids,
At least not 'bout their
Fancy brightly painted
Sterile playgrounds
Erected by city fathers,
School board members or
Some hoity-toity benefactor
Tryin' to show us what
Was supposed to be fun.

I had no need for the
Timbers planed smooth,
Vivid yellow plastic
Slippery slide, safety
Swings and dat platform
With all the doodads dat
Turned and swirled and
Twisted about dat
Made no sense to me.

But somewheres out behind
Grandma's chick' coop,
Out beyond the granary, and
Off a ways from the concrete walled
Milk barn, lined up like
Army tanks ready for battle,
Grandpa put out to pasture
Every wagon and plow and
Disc and tractor and truck
He ever did own.

And there for hours and a day
My brothers and me would play
Lettin' our imaginations run
Ignorant among the rusted brown
Configurations of old iron
Horses, chasin' redskins and
Nazis, moving mountains,
Operatin' machinery bigger
Than all-get-out, flyin'
Through space and time both,
Saving the world from itself,
Complete with canons and lasers,
Catapults and high wire acts and
It didn't cost nobody a dime.

Poetry Winner -- Youth

KANSAS WIND

by Madison Nichol

I am the Kansas wind
Wandering and weaving through the wheat
Stumbling and slithering down Highway 24
Slithering through the tiny towns
Blowing past the World's Biggest Ball of Twine
Wrapping myself around the trees at Waconda
Lake
Scooting through Chautauqua Park
Winding around the roller coaster hills
I am Kansas wind
Blowing across the gorgeous Kansas plain.

Fiction Winner -- Adult

PARTY DOLL

by Claudia Mundell

I don't know when I first noticed her. She had been sitting in the front pew on the right side of the church every Sunday that I could remember. Her weathered face and tattered clothes seemed to blend perfectly with the old frame church standing over a broken foundation and leaning under termite-eaten rafters.

I do remember when I first asked about her. Summer heat distracted parishioners from their prayers and forced them to fan themselves steadily with the face of Jesus stamped on cardboard fans donated by Benson's Funeral Home. "Air Conditioned" was stamped boldly beneath Bob Benson's name on the backside as if this might make death more inviting. Children grabbed the wooden handles and pumped elbows furiously to stir the Kansas heat into a breeze while mothers admonished them to wave the fans quietly.

Sitting alone as if her impoverished life style were a communicable disease, the ragged woman waved her own fan with the same intensity she used to chop her toothless gums together and to chew on the insides of her cheeks while sitting in rapt attention to the sermon. Despite the sweltering heat, her head was covered in a scarf tied turban style, a large knot anchored over her forehead. Her gray, frizzy hair was tucked inside the turban except for a few wisps that peeked out and lay damp with sweat on the nape of her neck. Dressed like a cleaning lady, she sat straight and tall with the confidence of a regal fashion model.

I inquired about her on one of those hot Sundays when the heat seemed to scorch my lungs before noon. I took shallow breaths just to keep the burning from going down. The movement of the car along the street towards home was the answer to long prayers begging earlier for heat relief. Face hanging out the car window like a panting collie, hair tangling into knots, I hoped the ride wouldn't end before I got my fill of moving air.

"What's the lady's name?" I asked, pulling my wind-chapped face inside the car.

"What lady, dear?" my mother asked absentmindedly, her eyes shut against the blinding sun.

"You know. The lady that dresses funny and always sits up front by herself."

"That's no lady. That is Party Doll," my father laughed, his elbow sticking over the open window. He always drove that way so his left arm was a deeper shade of raspberry than his right.

"Russell," my mother's voice warned, "We have just come from church. We shouldn't speak of others in a derogatory manner."

To me she said, "Barbara, her name is Gertie Moles."

Dad wasn't finished. "We good Christians don't speak improperly of people, eh? Does that mean we don't speak 'to' some of them either?"

Mom just turned and looked out the window at the passing yards as if trying to figure out why the grass was all burned to the consistency of Shredded Wheat. She clearly let Dad know she wasn't going to rise to his bait and get into a frenzied discussion. No one every won with Dad anyway. It was just too hot to try to give Dad lesson in morality.

I thought what a horrid name Gertie Moles was. It grated on the tongue and sounded like a burrowing animal. Party Doll had a snappy ring of fun and color to it at least.

Gertie Moles lived on the east side of town in a fire hazard of a shack that had never seen a paint brush. Set on low ground near Canville Creek, the shack faced annihilation every spring when flash thunderstorms turned the creek into a rampaging and angry stream. In the dog days of August, the rivulet dried up leaving the stench of moldy and steamy earth. Not far away stood both the county jail, an antiquated edifice of red brick, iron bars, and crumbling mortar and the town's most notorious tavern rightly called the Devil's Den.

The fact that Gertie lived in such wretched housing was enough fodder for the gossips but that she was rumored to live there in sin was more than the staunch Baptists and the

Thursday Bridge League could tolerate. No one could actually prove she wasn't married to Obediah Moles. But since she had used his name for so long, she was probably a common-law wife by now. Of course, locals couldn't imagine anyone wanting to marry lazy, drunken, worthless Obediah anyway.

The Moles made their living in trash. They hauled away trash for a small fee and then went through each load diligently looking for salvageable items that could be used, mended, or resold. Rusted bird cages with no doors, wash tubs, shadeless lamps, refrigerator motors, and broken chairs populated their yard waiting for use or sale. But the real wellspring of their discards was the town dump. Once and sometimes twice a day, usually in late afternoon, folks, could see their old truck heading west across Main Street and moving past the city limits to the junk yard. The truck was barely road worthy. Tires patched and bald, peeling paint, grill gone, windshield cracked, and truck bed leaning to the right, the truck chugged slowly forward to haul home booty.

It was at that dump that Gertie found her wardrobe. While sifting through tin cans and old magazines, she often found a faded dress, a yellowed blouse, or even a scarf unfrayed enough to tie up her hair. The fact that Gertie chose to wear each new garment over the old ones didn't seem at all peculiar to her, Gertie wore the layered look long before it became Flash Dance fashionable.

When the Moles couldn't earn the coins for a gallon of gas, they walked. But they rarely walked together. While Obediah shuffled along, hands thrust deep in pockets of a coat three sizes too large, or stopped to roll a cigarette with smudged and crooked fingers, Gertie could be seen a block or more ahead stomping off the steps like one traveling with a noble purpose. Her large feet were tucked into faded sneakers with holes at several toes, and she wore thick hosiery full of runners that were knotted below the knee. On Sundays or grocery shopping days, she wore her medley of garments and her cachet turban, but she added a neon splash of bright red rouge to her cheeks that chomped constantly as she chewed her toothless gums.

I forgot about Gertie Moles after that hot Sunday until autumn when the weather began to cool down from scalding to mere hot. My best friend, Janice, and I started riding our bikes again, crisscrossing the streets of our small town in the sunless evenings. Screen doors slammed, dogs barked at flying Frisbees, and smells of frying bacon wafted through neighborhoods. We could ride down any street in town because everyone looked out for all the town's kids.

"Let's ride near Canville Creek," I proposed one evening.

"I guess that is okay if we don't cross the railroad tracks or go out of town. If we go by the jail, maybe we can see a prisoner's face at the window," suggested Janice. "What do you think?"

Such things are entertaining in a small town. "Maybe. Let's go the shortcut through the Mole's alley."

"Are you kidding? Party Doll and that man give me the creeps!"

"They are just poor people, for heaven's sake. Come on." I straightened my Sea World tee shirt over my still flat chest and pedaled my bike out to lead.

Gertie was on the roof patching a hole, hammer and nails in hand. Climbing around with the agility of a much younger woman, she never looked up from her work of preparing her home, such as it was, for winter rains, snows and the cold. Other times I had caught her cutting the weeds around the debris in their yard with a scythe and stacking wood, always working like a man. Obediah was never around while Gertie worked. Maybe he was nursing a bottle of cheap wine or maybe the sight of real work bothered him.

In November the church sponsored the annual turkey dinner. It was a money making project, and everyone pitched in to make it a success. Long tables were set up at the American Legion Hall and covered in strong white butcher paper. All day women in pink sponge rollers covering their scalps and polyester pedal pushers toted in pies and took a turn carving turkeys and cubing bread for stuffing.

"Barbara, you and Janice go help Mrs. Lang place silverware and napkins on the tables," directed my mother as she carried her apple crumb pie to the dessert table.

Mrs. Anders started cutting Mom's pies into six evenly divided slices. She had been the pie lady at church dinners for 47 years. None of the other women were considered capable of cutting a pie with the skill of Eloise Anders.

I was setting out water glasses and forks at every folding chair when I saw her come through the double doors. Hands stretched out in front, each one held a pumpkin pie as an offering. Mrs. Anders grew white when she saw Gertie's pies, and the clamor of pans in the kitchen hushed as the women looked out the serving windows.

"I baked you some pie," was all Gertie said as she sat the pies down next to the saucers of perfect slices.

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Moles, I'll just set them back here until we need them."

Mrs. Anders moved one of the pies to a far table. Before she reached for the other Gertie Moles was already on her way out of the American Legion.

Women in the kitchen sighed with relief that she didn't want to offer help in the back. They cringed at the thought of Gertie Moles touching their food. Actually the pies looked fine. In fact, they looked a whole lot better than the green tomato pies brought every year by Grace Smalley.

It was Mrs. Smalley who came out and took Gertie's pies. "I know just what to do with these," she said as she scrapped the pumpkin into a bucket with potato peelings and onion skins.

The summer before our senior year, Janice and I were even more inseparable than ever. We sensed this would be our last summer of carefree days, and we did not want to waste a morsel of it. While other kids were dragging the whole six blocks of Main Street in souped up Chevys or having beer parties at the river's gravel bar, we continued to ride our bikes on treks into the country and to wrestle with weighty problems like should we ostracize draft card burners, should we join the women's movement, and would Janice really marry Buddy or go to college with me?

We packed lunches and thermoses of tea and were on bikes for hours at a stretch. We discovered old farmhouse foundations and dug through rubble for bottles, bent spoons, and memorabilia of other lives. We admired lonely stands of jonquils or abandoned rose bushes planted by women long gone before us. We rode across ancient bridges with no sides and wooden planks for flooring, scared to death the rotting lumber would finally give way. We poked around the junk yard and threw rocks at snakes from a safe distance. Often we saw the Moles there, but they were oblivious to our presence. Or maybe they chose to ignore us as we nosed on their turf.

Just before the turkey dinner that year, Obediah Moles died. He was buried quickly and cheaply at the county's expense. No one knew if he had any other family besides Gertie. No one bothered to find out.

"Mom, are you taking anything to Mrs. Moles' house since her husband died?" I asked when I learned of Obediah's death. Any other death in the community commanded flowers, food, and even money to help the families in their sorrow.

"I don't think so," said Mom flatly as she kept on peeling apples for her church pies. "No one called me from the Ladies Guild for help. It must not be my turn to help with a funeral."

"But they will do something for her won't they?" I pushed.

"Barbara, there is a committee for such things. I'm sure they will handle it. Now hand me that pastry crimper." She and I both knew that the church members were too busy now with the turkey dinner to handle this. Maybe that was as good a reason as any to overlook Gertie.

How much of it God arranged and how much of it was chance, I'll never know. The flu had hit several of the church members, including Janice, and the annual turkey dinner needed all the hands available. I was filling sugar bowls and creamers in the dining hall when Mrs. Anders dropped a piece of lemon meringue pie on the floor. She couldn't believe the mishap and feared she might be taking the flu herself. As Mrs. Anders left to take two aspirin and find a dishcloth to clean up her mess, Gertie Moles clumped in with her two pies, set them on the table, turned and left without a word.

I was alone, but I could hear Mrs. Anders still moaning about the fine piece of wasted lemon meringue. Without wasting another minute, I slashed through Gertie's pumpkin pies and lifted the pieces onto plates. Scattering the pieces throughout the rows of cherry, blueberry, and peach, I was finished just as Mrs. Anders returned. She never noticed a thing.

Later that evening, I heard several comments on the delicious pumpkin pies, but no one seemed to know who brought them. Eloise Anders couldn't even remember cutting them!

No one saw Gertie for a while after that. She missed coming to church. I was sure that while Obediah looked worthless to the rest of us, she saw something good in him. Plodding down the street couldn't have been the same knowing that he was not coming along behind her.

Midnight service on Christmas Eve brought Gertie back to the front pew. She had on a "new" coat. She'd left her turban off, and her gray hair frizzed about her heavily rouged cheeks. After services families filed out into the sharp night air and exchanged holiday greetings. Budd and Janice dashed over to me, but I had already guessed their news.

"Barbie, look at my Christmas!" squealed Janice as she held up her finger wearing a diamond as bright as her smile.

I pulled her close and hugged her hard with joy. Over her shoulder, I saw Gertie walk off into the darkness of Christmas night alone.

While I went off to college and on to Chicago with a job in journalism, Janice married Buddy, helped him start a dairy farm, and had babies. She had four children in six years before the cancer hit. We wrote and called often, but she asked me not to come home. She felt our lives had gone their separate paths, and we should keep right on down those paths without backtracking even for death.

I honored her wishes until she died, but I could not stay away from the funeral. Walking through the cemetery, I saw Grace Smalley's grave. Her unique but ugly green tomato pies didn't protect her from cancer either. Leon Baker, our town's only casualty from the Vietnam War, was buried here too. Tears mixed with beads of sweat from the July heat. I returned to my car and headed for the country roads that Janice and I had cycled on years earlier. Past pecan groves, over streams that had to be forded in wet weather, by places we had stopped for a quick picnic, and then I came to the town dump where we had dawdled away summer afternoons.

I stopped and got out into the heat. I began smiling as I remembered those afternoons and laughed aloud wondering how many grown women have fond memories of junk yards.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but the city don't allow no rummaging here."

Startled, I turned to face a short, ruddy-faced gent in overalls wearing an oversized straw hat. "They hired me to keep the trash burned, buried, and otherwise clean as possible."

"I wasn't rummaging, I was . . . er . . . just seeing what kind of a dump you have here now."

"A nice one," he said with pride.

"Does a lady named Gertie ever come out here anymore?"

"You mean ole Party Doll? Naw, she died before they hired me. Went to bed in all them raggedy cloths she owned and just died, she did."

I went back to my car and started the engine, but I turned the air conditioner off. Rolling down the window, I drove the road letting my hair blow and knot up in the hot wind. At least the scorching heat of a Kansas summer remained the same.

Essay Winner -- Youth

THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET

by Ashley Haverkamp

"Good morning Andy Kramer!" I exclaimed to a sleepy eyed co-worker. It was three o'clock in the morning on Saturday, March 10, 2007. It was Spring Break for the grade school and high school kids in Seneca, Kansas. My dad and I were just getting ready to start the barn up to begin milking cows when Andy walked through the door.

"The grade school is on fire," Andy stated with a funny expression on his face.

"No it's not," I responded unbelievably.

"Yes, it is! It has been in flames for the last two hours! Believe me, I can smell the smoke from my house!" Andy exclaimed. At that time, my dad walked back into the barn after bringing in the cows.

"The grade school is on fire!" I screamed at my dad.

"Uh-oh, that's not good. How big is the fire?" my dad questioned.

"Well, the whole school is nothing but a big ball of fire, and I'm guessing by the time it's put out, there won't be hardly any of the school left!" Andy piped up.

I looked at my dad and then at Andy, "The school we grew up in is going to be gone forever!" I said sadly.

The hours of the early morning passed by slowly. Andy and I didn't have much to say because we were still in shock. All that I could think about was my grade school and junior high days. All the volleyball and basketball games I played in that gym, all the cheers I screamed in that gym, all the trophies my teammates and I worked hard for, all the lasting memories I made in the hallways and classrooms of that school . . . gone! I wouldn't get to tell my own children someday, "Look, this is the school I went to!" I was devastated.

I went home from chores that morning and walked in the house feeling strange. I felt like a large part of my childhood years was ripped from me.

"Have you heard the news?" my mom questioned when she saw me.

"Ya, Andy told us first thing this morning," I replied in monotone.

"Do you want to go see it?" asked my mom. "I have to pick your brother up from Ryan's so you can come with me and then we'll go see it." My brother, Austin, had spent the night at a friend's house.

"Ya, okay," I responded.

I took a quick shower, threw on some clothes, and my mom and I headed into town. Other than the sound of country music on the radio, it was a quiet ride. "How did you hear about it?" I asked my mom.

"Ann Deters called me after you and your dad left for chores this morning to tell me she was taking Austin and the other boys at Ryan's in to watch their school go up in flames," she answered.

All morning I had been thinking about what I would all lose from my old school, but I didn't even think about my brother. He and his friends were all eighth graders at that school. They were not going to get to graduate from Nemaha Valley Junior High, like I had two years earlier.

My mom and I arrived at the grade school and junior high. I will never forget what I saw. The school looked like a battle ground from World War II. There were no windows or doors anywhere. The roof was completely gone. Smoke was still drifting out everywhere. Firefighters were scrambling everywhere trying to keep little flames out. But the sight that really hit me, was seeing no gym. The huge gymnasium floor that I used to play dodge ball on in gym class was gone and all that was left was a huge mess of metal beams, rubble, and bricks.

"How did this happen?" I asked out loud.

"They do not know . . ."my mom answered.

After taking pictures and letting all that I saw settle into my thoughts, my mom and I left. We picked up my brother from his friend's house.

The first thing out of my brother's mouth was, "Where are we all going to go to school at?" "I do not know, Austin," my mom replied sympathetically.

The answer came a few days later. For the rest of the school year, the junior high kids were to be up at the high school, and grade school kids were going to be spread out at different locations around our town. Spring Break was extended due to preparations of classrooms. Instant recovery was taking place throughout Seneca. The community pulled together to help clean up and set up new classrooms for their children. School supplies from all over the state were being sent to our community. The bigger question was what do we do next year?

A few weeks later, a committee of adults was put together to set up a bond for the new school. Ground was set aside next to the high school for the new grade school and junior high. Building plans were drawn and redrawn, voted on, and passed. Building of the new school would begin spring of 2008. Until the new school was established, classrooms were needed. Mobiles were moved in next to the high school for the junior high students. The west wing of the grade school that survived the fire was cleaned from smoke toxins and more mobiles were moved in for more classrooms. Even though moving on in such hardship seemed impossible, the people of Seneca made it possible.

A year and a half later, the new school is being built and students are back to their normal routines of going to school and learning new things. The fire that struck Seneca Grade School and Nemaha Valley Junior High on the early morning of March 10, 2007, was an unforgettable tragedy that is instilled in the hearts and minds of every member of the Seneca community. This tragedy didn't weaken the community for one second; it only made it stronger.

"Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear the tragedy today."—Unknown.

Essay Winner -- Adult

TIE A YELLOW RIBBON (1991)

by LORA K. REITER

Last week my dog came home from the groomer sporting red, white, blue—and yellow—ribbons. "He's supporting the troops," the groomer said. Flags have sprouted on my neighbors' houses, and I hear them popping in the February wind as I do spring yard work. Yellow ribbons festoon car antennas and all oak trees but mine. "We support our troops" posters, yellow, of course, distributed by the KC Star last week, bloom in windows up and down the block and across the town. But my yard and house are silent and retain their usual dun, white and brown. I have not decorated for the war.

I admit to feeling some pressure about this from my fellow Americans—a pressure I'm a little uneasy with. Maybe part of it is the same ambivalence I felt when one neighbor offered to give me a flag to fly during the Grenada invasion. She'd asked me about displaying one, and when I said I didn't have a flag, she actually brought one over. "Then we'd have a harmonious block," she said. I certainly didn't want to offend her or any other neighbor, and I'd never refused such a gift before. (Actually, I'd never been offered such a gift before.) But I didn't agree with our foreign policy in general or with that particular manifestation of it, and I wasn't convinced that a "harmonious block" was any indication of either patriotism or good sense—and I do trust that those can be redundant. At the same time, I felt that my neighbor took my refusal as a rejection of her and as an assertion of my inadequate Americanism. And that felt bad. A similar feeling is undeniably part of the mild intimidation bothering me now, surrounded by my neighbors' flags, ribbons, and signs.

However my gut resistance stays. I have watched the faces of soldiers before and after they arrive in Saudi Arabia; I've followed the war closely; I acknowledge my fear of Hussein and my preference that, having gone there, our troops should return victorious. I have wept in both anger and pain over Americans—and Jews and Palestinians and Iraqis. I hate this war, and I want it over. I want us—and them—safe from its horror.

Yet and still. I am not clear about this battle. I think complex and historical reasons for tension in the Near East are not clear to most of us, and until they are, I cannot be convinced that this is the field on which we should fight. What I'm thinking about are, for instance: efforts to develop alternatives to fossil fuel usage to decrease our dependence on mid-east resources; efforts to conserve energy; efforts to address the Palestinian-Israeli issues at top levels with powerful diplomatic and economic tools.

I want us to do something big and plain which demonstrates that we consider: (a) Fossil fuel is a finite supply; (b) Oil, not moral concerns, is our motive; (c) No lasting peace can grow from the dislocation of innocent people, no matter what end may have seemed to have been served. But I have not heard our commander in chief acknowledge or propose any such possibilities. Nor has he spoken of our long-term arming of Iraq.

What I hear Mr. Bush talking about are, instead, "freeing a country"—Kuwait—even though other raped, oil-poor lands have not been accorded such benevolent attention; restoring a democratic form of government—even though Kuwaiti Emirs preside over a highly discriminatory state; and avoiding any "politicalization" of Hussein's action—as though his action didn't create leverage to urge discussion of west-bank issues. Bush has made no move to support exploring alternative power sources such as solar energy or gasohol. He

has not required energy conservation accoutrements on new cars; and he supports development of Alaskan oil fields. . . . I had nearly forgotten he was once a Texas oil man.

So I am confused about this battle in that larger ecological, historical context. And contributing to my confusion is my response to these flags and ribbons. They all seem so clean and beautiful, so sweet and glorious, so unambiguous. They seem to affirm some decorous and undebatable principle of right, of justice, of even love. And me—I can't feel any of those about this war. The reality of the Gulf battle, both physically and morally, seems to me to be so different from those clean, abstract affirmations. I think of Wilfred Owens World War I poem, "Dulce et decorum est [pro patria mori]"—which translates to "How sweet and proper it is to die for one's country."

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

That's the central reality of the war for me. All those mangled bodies and spirits. All the fine doomed courage. All the willingness to be terrorized and to die. All the sweetness. All the bravado. And all the ignorance.

Yes, ignorance. I teach young men and women. I know a lot about what most of them know about the history, economics, international disputes, and political decision-making relative to this war. It is next to nothing—for most of them. They are nobly but irrationally patriotic. They display much the same spirit relative to U.S. sanctity and privilege as they do relative to their university's need and right to beat the hell out of a football rival. They do not question the decision to bomb the hell out of Iraq. They believe all those bombs are going down the air vents. They are ready to enlist, and most of them haven't even heard of the Shah of Iran or the Golan Heights.

Yet is my neighbors' attitude any more appropriate or realistic: flowering their homes with yellow ribbons? What are most of us doing, knowing in our hearts that our soldiers die willingly and well—but not knowing—and knowing that we don't know—what they are dying for? Surely my neighbors must have some of the questions I do. Surely we cannot all simply accept a politician's version

I think that we cannot bear to see it clearly. I think we cannot grant, simultaneously, that our children are at war, that we love them, that they may die AND that they may die surprised, inglorious, and betrayed into chaos. I think, because we cannot grant all that, we have to create some pristine, passionate principle of our own to explain what is otherwise unthinkable. We have to rationalize the slaughter. We have to "order" the chaos. The principle has to balance—cleanse—the wounds to their bodies and our moral selves. The principle must be of honor or duty, of freedom or love—some awesome positive to dupe or numb us to the actuality. So we surround ourselves with Old Glory, with the sweet, clean, proud symbol of our ideals of country and conduct, justice and selflessness. We dot our neighborhoods with bows and banners, current symbols of love and hope. And we say, "It's to support our troops."

But I wonder. Who sees the displays? Who is being addressed by the flags? Whose consciousness is being raised—or leveled—by these colors blowing in the wind? I don't think it's the troops. I think it's us. William Samuel Johnson once said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels." In this case, I don't agree. In this case, patriotism may be the only refuge for those of us who cannot bear to consider that this amassing of one of the most powerful armies of all time and this destruction have occurred, in large part, because of international unwillingness to consider the very ideals the symbols represent.

It's much too ambiguous for me. I can't, finally, allow myself to be intimidated into asserting clarity or conviction which I do not grant or feel. I'll tie no yellow ribbons on my trees.

Autobiography Winner -- Adult

ASH CREEK

by Lora K. Reiter

I'm the only first-grade dropout I know. I went to Ash Creek School in Jewell County for three days before I pretended to have a terminal bellyache, got my second sister to carry me home on her back (about a quarter mile, I suppose, on a little country road), and publicly declared that I would never return to that place. My mother didn't argue because, one: she knew I was impossible; two: she didn't think much of the school, herself; and three: we were moving the next year and she reckoned I'd have altogether new battles to fight then. So she let me assume I'd won the war, and I accepted my tribute of a peanut butter and pickle sandwich in right good faith, mounted my hobby horse, and spent the next few months in relative pleasure. It was 1944, and I was five years old.

I use the war metaphor deliberately. The U.S. was very much at war then. That was the year my brother graduated from high school and enlisted in the Army Air Force. It was the year we began to use German prisoners of war as laborers. And it was the year before we moved to the farm I thereafter considered home. So "war" was definitely on my mind. But I was embattled on my own terms and turf a good deal of the time, and going to school was a major engagement for me. I wanted nothing to do with it.

Ash Creek Grade School was a one-roomer with two outhouses and a steel merry-go-round. My brother had gone there. My three sisters were presently there—three of the five students enrolled. The other two were pretty little girls, the younger of whom I especially hated.

I hated her because she had attempted to help my mother get me out of the combine bin one day when Mother wanted to wash my hair. Next worst to going to school was having my hair washed, and I devised multiple stratagems for avoiding Mother and that fate. We had a wire fence around our yard, and I'd put both feet and both arms through, lock ankles and wrists on the outside, and grab a wire with my teeth. That was one generally effective defense. But if Mother cornered me away from the yard, I'd have to take to the combine bin. Mother couldn't manage the ladder and me at the same time, so I knew if I could outrun her to the top, I'd be safe. That's what I'd done one particular afternoon just as school let out and Loretta came tripping down the road that ran by our driveway.

She was, in fact, a lovely child, maybe seven or eight, with black hair in perfect rows of long curls, the kind Mother tried to hang on me with the old rubber ended curling iron I also hated. Loretta quickly and astutely sized up the situation and, with much effrontery, I thought, said, "Oh! I'll help you get her, Mrs. Reiter." And up the ladder she came.

I crouched like a jumping spider—or wolverine—in the far, deep corner of the bin. (Picture an old combine with the bin on top, high, exposed.) Like hell she was going to get me. . . .

Up she came, smiling and sweet, and over she climbed, stretching out her arm, her hand right in front of my mouth. Well, of course I bit her.

It was very satisfying to me to hear her scream, then yell and cry as she scurried down and ran home.

You will easily understand, then, that I didn't want to go to school with Loretta where my glory was outweighed by my guilt, and my jealousy compounded because she could read very well, and I couldn't recognize a single word.

I don't know if my parents understood any of that, but they did not insist that I return to Ash Creek after Dot toted me home and I mostly complained, after the bellyache charade, that the school teacher used only the same two chords at the piano no matter what song we were singing. (Maybe I couldn't read, but I had an unflinching ear for music. So did Mother. I think that was my real ace.)

I did kind of miss the sandbox at the back of the room. I'd always dug in real dirt, and the sand was clean and different. The children's chairs around it were a nice size, too, I thought. And the girls' toilet was a three-holer, one of them just the right size for a little kid. The maps and desks and pencils and paper teased me some, but not nearly enough to make me want to forsake my stick-horse—or to stick it out in the same room with Loretta. .

..

We did move the next year, and I had to go to a much bigger school, twenty students in two rooms, four grades in each. I had only one sister left there, and I've thanked her ever since for being kind to me as I hung on to her skirts at every recess and lunch hour. I didn't like that school either, but Mother wouldn't help me avoid it a second time. I managed to be or play sick for more than a month each year for the next eight, but ultimately I had to accede to the inevitable and stay the course, as it were. I graduated from Asherville Grade School with a class of four—and that was that.

It took me about eighteen more years to complete my formal education, and by then my life direction was fairly well charted—though I didn't know that for a long time. "School"—studying then teaching for nearly forty years—was something I seemed to have to do, a responsibility which slowly became more than a burden, a chore which became a means to freedoms and pleasures I had no idea existed.

I like the motto, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." I'm endlessly grateful to my long-suffering mother and father and sisters and, yes, even Loretta, for insisting on and modeling for me what I would have resisted forever and been lost without.