



2010 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

ODE TO GLASCO, KS

by Olivia Feagins

It's tiny,
with only 500 people.
Far away
from any big city.
But it has a park
where I play
and run a summer
Park Program,
with a huge merry-go-round,
swings, and monkey-bars.

My grandmother,
Kansas Grandma,
and my grandfather,
Grandpa Rollie,
both live there.
They have an old
farm house outside
of town with a
silo to climb
and a piano
to play.

My grandma runs
the "Farmer's Market"
every Tuesday
at the Corner
Store where they
sell homemade goods
and doll dresses.

It has the
"Hodge Podge"
which is an old-timey
soda fountain
shop, where
you can get malts
and shakes and
floats and cones.

Poetry Winner -- Adult

TROPOPAUSE

by W. G. Goodwin

When I parked the van
at the super store,
the wind took hold
and my door connected
with the vehicle beside me.

The wind tried to drown
my calling as
consumer, consumed, consuming.
Tried to drown the calling
of mouths to feed
and bottoms to wipe.

The wind tempted me to fly.
Just climb up and release.

Would it be strong enough to lift me?
To set me alight
like a blue plastic bag
empty and spinning
as it clutched one gust
after another
until I rose over the store,
over the parking lot,
over the two vehicles interlocked
over the cares of the blacktop world,
even over the slate colored clouds
until finally breaking into the
perfect blue void of the tropopause?

At best, I would simply
roll like tumbleweed
into those vacuous glass doors.

So, I disconnected the vehicles
leaving a good size wound,
a deep scratch that could not be itched.
I found paper and pen
and wrote a note.
Imperfect penance
offered under a wiper blade.

<p>A diner is there where there are specials and delicious food that we go to on Sundays for lunch and laughs.</p> <p>The post office has an old man who won't stop talking to you, who is really nice and gives out candy and treats.</p> <p>My good friend lives there and we go swimming at the big, blue, beautiful public pool together.</p> <p>I see my knitting on my grandma's coffee table, where I last left it.</p> <p>Driving! Driving? I'm only 11 but on the back, back roads, with my dad, I drive. That's what's good about being one- million miles away from everything.</p> <p>I love my Glasco.</p>	<p>The wind tore the note high into the sky mocking me for what I could never attain.</p> <p>Screw it, I thought.</p> <p>The wind had plans of its own, and I still had mouths to feed and noses to wipe.</p> <p>There's more than one store in this here town. And maybe the parking will be better.</p>
---	---

Essay Winner -- Adult

BULLYING

by Janice McIntosh

The problem of bullying is not new to our society. It's been going on for at least one hundred years and quite possibly even longer.

My Dad was the first victim of bullying that I was aware of at the early date of 1910 when he was only six years old. He recounted to me this true story of he and his young cousin, Orville, who lived on adjoining farms near the small town of Glasco, Kansas. Both of their Moms were excellent cooks and the two boys enjoyed various kinds of sandwiches—like brown sugar and butter, jelly, egg salad, or roast beef—on freshly-baked bread. They also received generous slices of chocolate or caramel frosted spice cake, shiny rosy red apples, or bright oranges depending on the season.

Unfortunately, the two little blond boys in their matching hand-knitted Norwegian blue sweaters were envied by three older boys who brought little or no lunches each day.

The older boys, new to this school, devised a plan to take the lunches away from George and Orville. They knew they would be in trouble with the teacher so they waited until the noon recess and lured the little boys to the back of the school with the promise of a game or the gift of a marble. When they were a safe distance away from the school, they snatched the little boys lunches and proceeded to eat the lunches themselves. They threatened George and Orville with hanging them in an old shed if they as much as hinted or told the teacher or their parents that their lunches had been stolen. The young hoodlums went so far as to take the two boys to an old storage shed on the edge of the school's property and showed the little boys the rope that they would use to hang them with as well as the old chair they would make them climb up on before they tied the rough scraggly rope around their necks and hung them.

Naturally, the boys were extremely terrified and didn't say one word. George's mother was wondering why he was so hungry when he returned home from school each afternoon, but George's father assured her he was probably just going through a growth spurt and she shouldn't worry. She tried not to worry but she just couldn't help it. It was so unlike George and he was so quiet at breakfast each morning.

Two mornings later, George's mother, Ovedia, heard a soft knock on her door soon after George left for school. When she opened the door she was thrilled to see Orville's mother standing there. She invited Hazel in enthusiastically as farm women in the early 1900s rarely received visitors early in the morning. Usually they all had too much to do. Ovedia put the coffee pot on the burner to reheat and invited Hazel to sit down. Hazel took a seat at the little white pine table covered with a pretty blue checkered tablecloth.

As Ovedia poured coffee, Hazel began to cry. "What on earth is the matter?" Ovedia asked Hazel; worriedly.

Hazel looked up, tears running down her cheeks, "Oh! Ovedia, when Orville kissed me goodnight last night, I noticed red rings on his neck. I asked him what had happened and at first he didn't want to say, but then he told me with salty tears running down his face. Three big boys had taken his and George's lunches and then tied a scratchy rope around his neck and told both him and George they would be hanged if they ever said a word about the stolen lunches.

"Hearing the confusion in the kitchen, Arden [Orville's father] came in to see what the problem was. He was shocked that anyone could be so cruel. The older boys are new in the neighborhood and no one knows their families that have come to live in our quiet and peaceful Solomon Valley.

"We talked to him quite a while and told him we would speak to you and something would be done immediately. Feeling encouraged, Orville went off to bed.

"That is why I have come," concluded Hazel. "Something must be done immediately as this behavior must stop."

"Absolutely," agreed Ovedia. "I will talk to Oscar this noon and he will be over to visit with Arden."

"Thank you so much. I already feel better," said Hazel. As Hazel got up to leave, she gave Ovedia a big hug.

When Oscar came in for lunch, Ovedia told him about Hazel's shocking visit. He said he would go across the road to Arden and Hazel's farm to sort this out.

Oscar left right after lunch and came home about an hour later. He detailed his plan to Ovedia. He and Arden would walk the two boys to school tomorrow earlier than usual so they could talk with the teacher.

When George came home from school, his parents told him about Hazel's visit and how they would help the boys.

"Oh thank you, thank you," cried George, relief flowing through his face and his clear blue eyes glistened with hope.

The next morning the two fathers and their sons left for school early. When they got there, the boys stayed outside playing marbles and the fathers went in to talk to the teacher.

She was horrified at what she heard. She told them that the sheriff would be contacted as well as the parents of the three older boys and she would also keep a close eye on the two little boys at recess and at noon, making sure they were safe.

The fathers thanked her and left the school. The boys came running up to them and they assured them that things were going to be safe from now on. They were never bothered again but the emotional scars of such a scare remained with both of them all of their lives.

The problem of bullying remains in our society to this day. Experts estimate that 10-15% of students experience bullying. The seriousness of this continues to escalate as four teenagers have committed suicide recently as the result of the cruel taunting that they faced constantly.

We are in a "culture of conformity" and anyone who is different is often the victim of cruel and vicious assaults. They may be from a foreign country and dress differently or speak with an accent. They may be overweight or speak with a lisp. But the biggest problems now days seem to be if a child is gay or is presumed to be gay. Some of their classmates never give up teasing them, teasing them unmercifully because they are different.

Bullies often feel insecure themselves and bullying others makes them feel more powerful. They have a complete lack of sensitivity toward those with differences.

It is hard for parents to help their child or perhaps the child doesn't share the problem with them due to embarrassment or feeling they will just make things worse by talking about it. Although bullying takes place at preschools, grade schools, and junior high, it becomes much more serious at the senior high level and beyond. Bullying often extends into the early years of college when students are on their own for the first time, and trying to find ways to express their own identity as an independent person.

No family is immune from the ravishes of bullying. It knows no economic or cultural bounds. Our entire society is affected by this ravishing evil.

There are many reasons for bullying. The first and most important in my way of thinking is the breakdown of the family unit in our present society. Families are more mobile and there is less cohesiveness in our neighborhoods where once neighbors knew one another well and depended on and helped each other.

I also feel there is a breakdown in moral consciousness and an attitude among some parents of "kids will be kids" and "kids need to fight their own battles" instead of relying on adult interventions to solve their problems.

The advent of the computer has played a large role in the increase of bullying and its serious consequences. Children used to go home after school and be safe from the taunts and antics of their schoolmates. But now there is no safe place because many times cyber bullying takes place on Facebook and similar sites. In many respects, this is the most serious bullying of all.

There was a recent editorial in USA Today concerning the Rutgers freshman and gifted violinist, Tyler Clementi. He jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate and a friend secretly filmed his gay encounter and then streamed it onto the Internet.

It is not easy to prevent cyber bullying occurring via cellphone and world wide web sites, like Facebook and Youtube. However, online disapproval toward these messages from their peer group could go a long way toward shaming the perpetrators to stop sending such hurtful and cruel messages.

As a society, we all have a responsibility to help solve this serious problem. I imagine there are very few of us who haven't experienced some form of bullying, either toward ourselves or toward someone in our immediate family.

We need to all be alert to the symptoms of bullying and work hard to seek solutions to this horrific problem. There needs to be special programs which are age and grade appropriate, available to parents, administrators, and required of students at every grade level. This needs to be done on a large scale to make everyone aware of the devastating results of such cruel behavior and the signs of bullies and of victims.

Many youngsters and young adults carry the scars of this horrific behavior all their lives. The ultimate tragedy, of course, are those who see the only solution to their pain is committing suicide, leaving behind grief-stricken families and friends. They who share the burden of guilt for a lifetime, because they did not realize what a serious situation their child or friend was facing.

Parents need to continue to enlist the aid of school authorities when their child is being bullied. If the school administration does not act, they need to notify the school board or the local police and follow up aggressively until appropriate action is taken. As neighbors and friends, we need to monitor more closely the lives of our own children and talk about bullying with them and impress upon them the serious consequences of such behavior.

We need to be more alert as a nation to the repercussions of such cruel behavior. We need to learn the signs of bullying and the misery of those being bullied. We need to help victims before more promising young lives are needlessly lost.

Fiction Winner -- Youth

JOHNNY

by Lacy Ackerman

Marie hated the rain. It slowed everything down and always started a nasty chain of events. Despite many complaints to her landlord, the ceiling leaked in her apartment, forcing her to clean up the mess before she could get ready in the morning, making her late. If it was raining, Marie's enormous black lab Gertrude wouldn't go out to do her morning business, causing Marie to be even later. And, just for kicks and giggles, the rain might cause the road construction to slow to halt, causing the traffic along Marie's morning transit to do likewise, making her later still.

Marie was having one of these days on the fateful morning of April 22. After leaving her small apartment, (reminding a dozing Gertrude "To make use of that doggie door every once in a while,") Marie ran through the downpour to her car, trying to not get her scrubs completely soaked.

"That would be the capper to a perfect morning," she thought glumly, as she turned the key in the ignition. Luckily her bad luck had not seemed to have affected her Sable, and the engine turned over with a reassuring sound. Sighing with relief, Marie put the sedan in reverse and backed out of the apartment parking and left for the hospital.

Marie Hart was a nurse, pushing 30, living just outside of Kansas City, Kansas. If her mother were alive, she probably would have been reminding the young nurse that her biological clock was ticking, and she wanted to have grandchildren sometime this century.

Unfortunately, Marie's mother had died when Marie was still very young, from breast cancer. Marie only had faint memories of her mother, and these seemed to be fading as Marie grew older, no matter how hard she tried to hold on to them.

It was her father who had raised Marie after his wife's death, taking on the responsibilities of both parents, God bless him. Living in a small western Kansas town, where most people were employed doing some kind of farm work, Marie had found childhood peaceful. Her father was warm and loving, coming home every night from his mechanic job to play catch with Marie, even though she knew he was tired. God, she missed him.

She hadn't returned to the small town since her father's death over two years ago. It brought back too many memories. Instead, she had dived head first into her nursing, something she absolutely loved.

Unfortunately, this left very little time for dating and socializing, as Marie's friends were so eager to point out. If her mother wasn't there to remind her of age, they certainly took care of it for her.

"Your ovaries are going to dry out and float away soon!" was Marie's best friend Sky's favorite line to use. And he wasn't afraid to say it . . . over and over again.

Driving to work, Marie couldn't help but think about Sky. Just the day before Marie had agreed to meet him for coffee at their favorite Starbucks before her shift at the hospital. Unfortunately, Marie's love life was Skylar's chosen topic to yet again talk (nay, nag,) Marie about.

"When was the last time you had a date, Pookie?" Skylar said. "I mean really, people are going to start thinking that you're a nun or something!"

"I'm not Catholic," Marie pointed out.

"Doesn't matter! People don't know that!" Sky said, sounding exasperated.

Marie just sat and watched Sky talk, smiling to herself. There was Sky, sitting in his skinny jeans and flamboyantly colored sweater, sipping at his double-Chocó mocha latté between comments.

Marie just sat quietly, sipping her own coffee, listening patiently, despite the fact that she was hearing this rant for perhaps the bazillionth time.

"I can't imagine why you aren't married already, Marie! You have such a cute bod! Not that you can tell it in those baggy scrubs you're always wearing," Skylar said, grimacing at Marie's Minnie Mouse scrubs.

Marie looked down at herself. "What, they're comfortable!" Marie replied. "Besides, have you ever tried to get blood and vomit out of cashmere?"

Skylar made a face at that one, screwing up his face and sticking out his tongue.

"Bleck! I don't know how you do it, Pookie, I really don't," he said, shaking his head slowly in wonderment. "Thank God there are people in this world like you who are willing to do that nasty job, because I'm sure not."

Marie laughed. The thought of Sky cleaning up one bedpan with his perfectly manicured fingers was joke. Not to mention that he was a complete germaphobe.

"No, you aren't really cut out for the job, I must say."

"Are you sure that you won't let me take you shopping this weekend? Get you some new clothes?" Sky asked hopefully.

"No," Marie said, definitely.

"Well, at least let me set you up with a guy or something. I know lots of cute guys!" Sky said, pleading.

It wasn't that Marie didn't want to settle down and start a family; it was just that she had never been fond of dating. While some find the hunt exhilarating, Marie did not. She would have much preferred it if Mr. Right just walked through her apartment door, sat down on the couch, and said "Hi! I'm here to be your husband."

Marie sighed, sensing that there was no winning with Sky today. "Where did you meet these cute guys?"

"Well, alright, they might not be your type," he admitted. "But I'm sure that at least one of them will know an equally hot straight guy."

Marie smiled. No matter how much Sky annoyed her, Marie could never be mad at him.

"Why do I have to have a man, when I have you to love?" Marie asked.

Sky's face split into an ear-to-ear grin. "Aww, Pookie! I love you, too!" he said, leaning across the table to give Marie a hug, nearly tipping over both their coffees.

Marie couldn't help but smile remembering this, sitting at a complete stop as she waited for the construction crew to let her through. Maybe Sky was right. Maybe she did need to work a little harder to find that perfect guy.

But first, work.

Marie worked in the emergency room of one of the busiest hospitals in the Kansas City area. Because of this, she could never say what she was going to see during any single shift. Marie loved it. She was never bored, and she was always challenged. She also got a great deal of satisfaction from the fact that she was helping someone or even saving a person's life.

As she walked through the doors of the E.R., the gloominess of the day left Marie, and she was filled with inner peace. She was home.

Unfortunately, the day was slow; however, this gave her time to give each of the patients that were there more attention—a teenager who had slipped and broken his ankle trying to do a trick on his skateboard out in the rain, a man complaining of stomach pain after eating some sort of suspicious looking substance out of the back of his refrigerator ("Men!" Marie thought silently to herself), and a woman who had sliced her hand open on broken glass and required stitches.

But the day would be far from uneventful. In fact, it would be one that Marie would never forget.

At about one o'clock, just after Marie had dug a penny out of a toddler's nose with a pair of forceps while the mother watched anxiously on, an ambulance arrived. The paramedics unloaded the gurney, which held a young man who stared unblinking at nothing. Marie met the paramedics at the emergency room doors as they rolled him in.

"Who we got, Marshal?" she said to one of the medics. She had known Marshal from the time she moved to Kansas City. He was originally from Texas and talked with a slight southern twang. He was an experienced and competent medic and was usually on top of things, but not today. Marshal just shook his head, looking mystified.

"Have no idea, Miss Marie. Found this guy sittin' out on a park bench, staring out into outer space. Person livin' across the street said he'd been sittin' there for over a day, not movin' an inch. Called 'cuz she thought he might be crazy or somethin'."

"Well, is he?" Marie asked. "What did he say when you approached him?"

"That's the weird part, Miss Marie. Hasn't said a word since we picked him up. Won't even tell us his name."

By this time, the group had reached one of the rooms and had rolled the gurney into the center of it. He continued to stare out at nothing in particular, with no signs of life in his pale blue eyes.

Upon closer inspection, Marie found that the man wasn't as young as she had originally thought. His curly brown hair seemed to go in every single direction at once, and his ears stuck out just a little, making him look younger.

Now that she was close to him, however, Marie estimated him to be in his mid- to late-twenties. He had fair skin with a few freckles that ran randomly across his nose. He was skinny, actually too skinny; he was just skin and bones. Marie wondered when the last time he had eaten was.

As she rolled up the sleeve of the man's filthy plaid shirt to take his blood pressure, Dr. Gilbert walked in. Dr. Gilbert was one of the oldest and most experienced doctors in the hospital and Marie's favorite to work with. Kind and gentle, he was also a favorite with the patients. Marie hoped that his presence would be enough to ease the patient out of his almost catatonic state.

With a brief nod of acknowledgment to Marie, Dr. Gilbert began to study the patient's chart another nurse had just handed him. Apparently, he wasn't happy with what he saw, for he frowned down at the chart, his brow creasing in concentration. Finally, with a quiet grunt, he flipped the chart closed, tucked it under his arm, and regarded the man with interest.

"So what seems to be the problem today, sir?" he asked the man politely.

There was no response. Not even a blink.

But Dr. Gilbert was not in the least bit discouraged. He tried again. "Let's start with an easier question, shall we?" trying a different tactic. "What's your name, son?"

Again, no response.

Dr. Gilbert continued to regard his patient for another moment, and then with another grunt, turned to Marie.

"Was there any I.D. on this man when he came in?" he asked. Marie shook her head.

"No," she said. "No I.D. Not even a library card. He didn't have a wallet either. Seems like the only thing he has is the shirt on his back." She received a grunt in answer from the doctor. He was again peering at the chart he held.

"Let's do a CAT scan of the head. See if this man has suffered any blunt force trauma. And I want a complete blood work-up. See if we can find any indication of a substance that would have done this to him."

He flipped the chart shut and handed it to Marie. He then turned to the patient, waved his hand in front of the man's face, and when he didn't receive any kind of response, spun on his heel and left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

Unfortunately, (or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it) the CAT scan and the blood studies all came back as normal, as did all the other tests that Dr. Gilbert ordered. There seemed to be absolutely nothing medically wrong with the man, except for the fact that he still would not eat or drink. No matter what Marie brought to him, the man simply would not eat. For this reason Dr. Gilbert was forced to admit him and put him on IV fluids.

After the stranger spent a night under observation in the hospital, the police were called. The hope was that they could identify who the man was by his fingerprints and thereby be able to find a next-of-kin to contact. Marie, however, wasn't hopeful. For some reason she just couldn't shake the feeling that the man's identity would be a mystery for a long time to come.

Marie's concerns ended up being well-founded. There were no records of the man's fingerprints in the police's database. Since he was still unable to tell anyone his name and had come in with no form of I.D., the police was now investigating all missing person reports in the area to see if they could find one that resembled the mystery now in hopes that they would find someone to contact.

Until that time, however, the man was admitted into the hospital, under the name of John Doe. "John" was still not eating, would only doze off occasionally, and, of course, would not communicate. Until he showed the hospital staff that he was capable of doing all three, or the police found someone to contact about him, John would be staying at the hospital indefinitely.

He had become something like a medical mystery for all the doctors in the hospital. There was always one kind or another going in or out of his room all day long. And, of course, all the residents were eager to try to please their mentors by trying to diagnose this medical anomaly; all of course, turned out to be wrong. All tests continued to come back normal.

Marie didn't think all of the attention was good for the patient; in fact, she thought it was the last thing he needed. But when she expressed this opinion to the Chief of Medicine, it was promptly ignored. There was even talk of a possible appearance on the six o'clock news, to (supposedly) get the story out so the police could find whoever was looking for him.

But as the days passed, Marie became less and less hopeful that someone would appear out of the woodwork.

It seemed like this man was all alone in the world.

After a week, Marie had had enough. She was tired of just watching this man stare off into space while everyone around him treated him like a monkey in the zoo.

That was when Marie decided to take things into her own hands.

She waited until Friday. Marie always took the night shift on Friday nights, mainly because Friday nights could bring some interesting cases into the emergency room. But this Friday, the emergency room was the farthest thing from Marie's mind. All of her attention was focused on the mystery man.

She waited until after midnight. The hospital was quiet. By this time all the doctors were either long gone or had gone off to catch a few precious moments of sleep in the on-call room. She hoped that this would eliminate the chance of getting interrupted. It was then when she walked into the patient's room, holding doggedly onto her book.

Marie had always been an avid reader, especially of classic novels. She loved Shakespeare especially. That was why when she had tried to pick out a book to bring the night before, she had fallen back on her favorite Shakespeare story.

Marie walked quietly into the room. The man was still awake, staring off in to space like usual. The lamp on the bedside table cast its light across his face, making his eye sockets look haunted and hollow. She pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed; the man didn't move or do anything to acknowledge her presence, but Marie was not about to give up yet.

"Hi there," she said gently. "My name's Marie."

There was no response, but she knew he could hear her. Just like a coma patient, she would talk to him, even if he could not respond.

"Can you tell me what your name is?" she asked, knowing she wouldn't receive a response in return. "Everyone around here calls you John. But I think that is all little too stuffy, don't you? So I think until you can tell me what your real name is I'll just call you Johnny."

Johnny just blinked.

"I brought something for you," Marie said. "It's one of my favorite books. It's called Romeo and Juliet. I thought I might read to you for a little while."

Even though she received no response, she went ahead and opened the novel. It was the copy her father had given her. The novel was bound in smooth brown leather, with the title stamped in gold on the front. Even the pages were trimmed with gold. It was one of Marie's most prized possessions.

And so she began to read. Page after page she read as her audience remained silent. She didn't know if it was doing anything for Johnny, but it calmed Marie. She was absorbed into the story until she felt like she was there among the Montagues and Capulets. She forgot that she was dressed in scrubs, sitting in a hospital next to a man who couldn't even tell her his own name.

It wasn't until she reached the scene where a heartbroken Romeo reaches the side of his dead lover that she realized that Johnny was silently crying, still staring at nothing. Marie stopped reading. "What's the matter?" she asked.

At first she got no response. And then, he spoke.

"That's what happened to me," he said, in a voice so quiet that Marie had to strain to hear. "That happened to me. I lost my Juliet." He was unable to say anything more. He just shook with repressed, silent grief.

And then it stopped as soon as it had started, and no matter what Marie said he would not speak again. He just went back to staring, looking at all, and seeing nothing.

Finally Marie decided that there was nothing more that she could do. She got up, taking her book with her, and left the room, leaving Johnny with the memory of his lost Juliet.

Johnny died two days later. It appeared that he died of a heart attack brought on by something called stress cardiomyopathy, also known as "broken heart" syndrome. For some people, catastrophic events like a death in the family can cause weakness in the heart muscle. It seems that the stress of losing his Juliet was too much for Johnny.

But it wasn't until after his death that the complete story of the mystery man was revealed. It turned out that Johnny's real name was Glenn, and somehow he had made it from San Francisco to Kansas City. His family reported him missing when he vanished after his girlfriend, Julie, unexpectedly committed suicide.

Even though the rest of the hospital seemed to forget about Glenn in less than a week, Marie was having a harder time. He was always lurking in the back of his mind. While she felt immense grief for Glenn, it made her realize something about herself. She realized that she wanted to experience the kind of love that Glenn obviously felt for Julie. It was time that she found her Romeo.

One year later, she married Brad. It turned out that Sky really did know some really amazing straight guys. They had been together ever since Sky had set them up on a blind

date less than a month after the death of Glenn. He made Marie finally feel complete. He was everything that she had ever wanted. He was kind, caring, affectionate, and hopelessly romantic. They were married in church in Marie's hometown. They both decided that Marie's father would have wanted it that way.

On their honeymoon in Hawaii, Marie looked up into the sky. There she was, sitting in the sand in paradise, her beloved husband by her side. She realized that none of it would have been possible without Johnny.

So she looked up at the sky and saw a star, sparkling brightly in the night sky. She brought her hand up, and blew it a kiss.

"Thanks, Johnny."

Autobiography Winner -- Adult

SILK PURSES

by Joyce Koops

I was in the fifth grade. Leroy was in the sixth.

There were twenty-four of us in our neighborhood, and, like the Twenty Froggies Went to School of nursery rhyme fame, we went to school every day. Not beside the rushing pool, (Wherever would we find one?) but to our own temple of learning, the little white schoolhouse at the crossroads. "When we go to school, they say, first we work and then we play." Believe me, that precept had been hammered into us from babyhood, so day after day, without complaint, we did our arithmetic, copied our spelling words, and answered the questions at the end of the chapter; all against the steady clatter of shoes marching back and forth to the recitation bench. Every day was the same. We had no reason to think, on that particular day in 1941, that the sky was about to fall.

Miss Postma had just called out "Sixth Grade Language!" when it happened. A shiny black car drove onto our schoolyard. Miss Postma turned pale. "It's Mr. Tye!" she gasped.

Mr. Tye was the County Superintendent of Schools.

"Get out a book. Act like you're studying!" she barked. We did. All except Leroy, who was already seated on the recitation bench, he being the sum and substance of the entire sixth grade.

I didn't dare take my eyes off my geography book, but I heard Mr. Tye come in. I heard him say he come to "observe a lesson." I risked a sideways glance and saw Miss Postma bring him a chair. "I wish he'd go home," I thought. I bet Leroy was thinking the same thing.

Poor Leroy. My heart went out to him. Already called to the recitation bench, he knew he had to face the firing squad alone. And of all the bad luck, this was the day he had to recite the first three verses of "The Charge of The Light Brigade."

In abject misery, Leroy stepped up on the teacher's platform. I can see him still. Freckles more vivid than ever, he stood first on one foot, then the other, his hands hanging self conscious and clumsy from his skinny wrists. Although the straps of his striped overalls had been let down as far as they could go, a good expanse of skin showed between the bottom of his pants and the top of his heavy farmer shoes.

After one desperate breath, Leroy swallowed hard and plunged ahead. "Half a league half a league half a league onward into the valley of death rode the..."

"No. No. No!" Mr. Tye nearly scared us out of our wits. "Not that way!" he shouted as he rushed to the front of the room, all out of place in his Sunday shoes and Sunday suit-coat that wouldn't button in the front. "No, no!" he yelled at the frightened Leroy, "Use expression! Like this. I'll show you."

He showed us all right. Did he ever show us. I felt kind of embarrassed for him making such a spectacle of himself, but I had to admit it was quite something the way he knew the whole piece by heart without even studying it first.

At recess we told Leroy we liked the way he said it better.

It wasn't Leroy's fault that he didn't use Expression. He didn't know what the poem was about. None of us did. The rule was that if we turned a new page in our Language Book and found a poem there, we had to learn it, or part of it, even if we had not an inkling of what it meant. I am ashamed to say I once memorized most of "Old Ironsides" before I caught on that it was about a ship. In fairness, there probably was a study guide beneath each poem, but if so, we never read it. I don't think Miss Postma did either.

Miss Postma got married that summer. In September we had a new teacher, and school took a dramatic turn.

Miss Zink was artistic. Just out of college that year, she took it as her mission to turn twenty-four pairs of sows ears into silk purses. She had her work cut out for her. She did her best, but the transformation was slow in coming. Not that we resisted culture. Oh, no. We cheerfully tackled everything she came up with and exercised remarkable restraint during her lessons on Art Appreciation. It beat working. "This is school?" we wondered. Our parents wondered too. Gone was Miss Postma's "turn, rise, pass" sense of order. Gone were the ceaseless marches to The Recitation Bench. Workbooks took second seat. We were busy doing Other Things.

Unusual things. We took nature walks, looking for Shapes and Colors. We spatter-painted with screen and tooth brush. We rolled long snakes of clay and coiled them into lopsided pots. We tore colored paper into little pieces and made pictures called mosaics. We carved animals out of Ivory Soap. One morning, if you can believe it, Miss Zink dumped half a truckload of straw (she called in Raffia) on the floor and we spent endless hours weaving baskets. Even Leroy.

Miss Zink was musical too. She frowned on our tradition of cowboy songs for opening exercises and it wasn't long before we had new books with yellow covers that said: "Selected Songs for Elementary Education." Some, like "My Old Kentucky Home," were fun to sing. Some were strange. What could anyone make of "When A Body Meets A Body Coming Through The Rye"? One song went like this: "If I'd as much money as I could tell, I never would cry clothes (old shoes, old rags) to sell."

I missed "Git Along Little Dogies" and "Red River Valley."

One day Miss Zink said we had a treat in store. Her friend from college, who was an Accomplished Musician was coming to play the piano for us. "I hope you will act like you appreciate her," she said doubtfully. "If anyone dares laugh about her or her playing . . . well, all I can say is: You Better Not!"

That open threat scared us more than anything.

She came the next day right after noon hour. I cannot recall one thing of how she looked from the front, but I can still see the back of her and her bottom, as they zipped and bounced across the piano bench while she pounded the keyboard from one end to the other. It's a good thing we had been warned not to laugh. We didn't. Not a flicker of a smile crossed our faces. We sat like wooden clothes pins, and only jumped a little bit when she ended with a mighty crash.

We clapped. Miss Zink smiled and we knew she was pleased. But there was more to do. We had to show appreciation. So we fell to it, all talking at once in a way Miss Postma would never have allowed.

"That was nice. That was real nice," we said. We nodded our heads with great authority. Then we turned to each other. "Wasn't that good?" we gushed. "Wasn't that good?" Around the room we went, nodding and simpering until at last Henry closed the show by pronouncing like a grand benediction: "I never seen the pyano played like that before in my whole life."

Miss Zink got married that summer. She married a professor of music. In September we had a new teacher. We saw right away that she was old. Maybe fifty. We sang hymns for opening exercises. But that's another story.

Autobiography Winner -- Youth

RISING FROM THE ASHES

by Makenna Imhotle

On March 10, 2007, when I was fourteen, my life changed forever. The day started with my mom coming in to tell me that my grade school, Nemaha Valley Grade School, had burned down. I was in shock and did not know what to think or do. Thousands of hours of my life had been spent in that building, and I did not want to accept that it was gone. I crawled out of bed and looked at my school library book on the floor, Fahrenheit 451, a devastating irony.

As I got dressed, I could not wrap my head around the concept; it just still did not seem possible. My mom was waiting to take me to the school to see for myself. This trip was not how I imagined my spring break events to take place. I slid into the van, wanting to see for myself but was not prepared to view the devastation the flames had caused.

Once we were within a few blocks of the school, fire trucks began to line the street. I counted at least six of them, many from surrounding towns. Mom parked the van, and I stepped out. I felt numb, unaware of any of my surroundings except for the remnants of the school. On the top floor of the building, I could see a single dancing flame. This fiendish image is burned into my memory. I stood on the opposite sidewalk staring and completely unaware of the concept of time. My mom allowed me to attempt to absorb this reality. She stayed by my side until she knew that in my numb state I would not be able to convince myself to turn away. She asked if I was ready to leave, and I started for the van.

Even though my spring break was extended in order to make arrangements for the location of the students, I was not excited for the reason behind these extra days off. For a few days, I searched for answers I knew I would not find. I questioned why this happened and what the next step towards recovery was. One night my dad came home with some news.

"The school is looking for people to help move some of the items that were able to be recovered up to the high school. I think they would really appreciate students' help," he informed me. This was exactly what I needed to hear. I realized that this work would help me find better closure to this incident.

The next morning, I hopped on my bike and rode up to the high school. There I found the high school counselor, and she pointed me in the right direction to assist in the moving. I spent the rest of my spring break riding up to the school and moving computers, books, and other school supplies. People kept showing up with crates, trailers, supplies, and other items for the grade school. The entire community worked together to help the school in whatever way they could. Volunteers helped carry, sort, and label items brought for the school. The disaster seemed to have created this unstoppable machine of a community, working as one unit on a common goal. By staying busy, I was able to feel that I was making a difference.

Even though the destruction of this building still saddens me, I was able to find closure and acceptance. I am very pleased with the new building that was constructed to create a quality location for public education. Despite the many negative aspects of this event, I believe that the way the community bonded together to handle it outweighed these negative features.