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Valley Voices
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Adult Poetry—First Place

She's A Solomon

by Laura E. Prater, Victoria, Kansas

She starts her pilgrimage
Leaving The Smokey behind
Uncertain of her destination;
Ignorant of her fate.
Slowly twisting through The Great Plains
Native tribes call her home
Scattering teepees along her banks.
Later years saw explorers with one calling her by name
She greeted settlers heading west, offered salvation to those staying.
Modern man has stopped her along the way with it's concrete dams
But onward she flows.
Indecisive she splits to North and South
Reaching as far as she can
Both ends dying, lingering into sand.

Adult Autobiography—First Place

A Saga on Water-- Or the Lack Of It

by Suzanne Waring, Great Falls, Montana

"Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink." Samuel Taylor Coleridge was talking about being stranded on a becalmed sailing ship in the middle of the ocean. I'm talking about a farm in Kansas.

It is generally known that Southeast Kansas receives around 32 inches of rain per year, enough that very few irrigate fields on their farms. But for some reason the farm where I grew up didn't have decent drinking water. To this day I continue to be paranoid about having good water at the tap.

1946: When we first moved to a SE Kansas farm, a cistern was used. We would wait for it to rain, discard the water that first cleaned off the roof of the house, and then turn a handle to allow the rain to fill a rock-lined cistern. As soon as my mother realized that black snakes lived in the cistern, she was done with cistern water.

1953: My folks had a well drilled and hit salt water. We did drink this water for a time as I remember that lemon/lime Kool-Aide was the only decent way to drink it. Because the well was so deep and the pipe quite lengthy, it was difficult to hand pump. Pumping water to fill the Maytag washer and two rinse tubs nearly wore us all to the shape of putty.

During that period, we drove to the neighbors' who had a good well to fill jugs of drinking water. My mother was a coffee fiend, and she wanted good water for her coffee.

1955: A laundromat of sorts opened up in a town eight miles away so Mother started taking the laundry to town. This business had four Maytags with rinse tubs. Each person rented a machine and did her laundry by filling the three vessels with city water. The wet clothes were put through the wringer into baskets to be taken home to be hung on the clothesline. Electricity had come to the farm only five years earlier; driers were still in our future.

1958: Years passed and we still didn't have decent drinking water. My father had a reservoir built that drained from a forty-acre field. We rejoiced when the reservoir started filling up. The folks designated a room to be the bathroom. For a long time we had only a tub, but eventually, a toilet that called for a septic tank was installed.

Then my dad went fishing and decided to put his catch in the reservoir. The fish multiplied. Since the water wasn't filtered, it not only was murky looking but also smelled like fish. We took baths in it anyway. Instead of emitting the odor of roses or lavender, I probably smelled like fish for years.

1963: My grandparents moved to a town five miles away that had a community water system. We carried jugs to their house to get good water to drink and to do dishes.

1973: The neighbors drilled for natural gas on their property about 400 feet from my parents' house. The well failed to produce natural gas but it did produce good water. Since the well was much closer to my parents' house, the neighbors gave the folks the opportunity to connect to the well. It worked great most of the winter, but in the summer water production slowed to a trickle.

As I compare my life to my parents', I see how having inadequate water somewhat shaped their lives, especially how my mother went about her daily tasks. Not having enough water to do what needed to be done was time consuming when I simply turned on the tap for both cold and hot water.

1982: Thirty-six years after my parents moved to that farm, the community was able to apply for funds to build a rural water system. What a difference it made to my parents' lives. Plenty of water was available to drink—for a good cup of coffee—to do laundry and to take baths. There was even water to irrigate the garden during dry spells.

When I married, I didn't put having good drinking water at the tap in my wedding vows, but I made my husband promise that we would live only where there was adequate drinking water. We have had a well for our water consumption that made me nervous, but, except for short outages, we have always had good water.

In some geographical regions, there is already a water shortage. On the occasions that we have driven through the western Canada and viewed the huge rivers with gallons of rushing water when I knew that California was stricken with severe drought, I have thought more about the even more intense water shortages to come. My paranoia tells me that in the not-far future, Canadian pipelines will be built that will hold not oil, not natural gas, but precious water. In the meantime, I'm thinking about drilling another well.

Adult Essay—First Place

Poetry Unites

by Lora K. Reiter, Beloit

We had a kind of isolated life on a small Kansas farm our parents rented. Youngest of five, I spent my time with the dogs and cats, horses and cows, even the mean old sow who wouldn't let me cuddle her sweet little pigs. At 78, I am still surrounded by animals. But I hated school. I am the only first grade drop-out I know.

Yet, we had mystery....

One of my earliest memories is of my mother, sitting late at night at the round dining room table, surrounded by books, a paring knife, and a jar lid full of Pall Mall cigarette butts and pencil shavings...her shadow, flickering huge on the wall, cast there by a gas lamp, usually, one mantle short, usually, because of a suicidal miller.

Mother wrote poems.

I came to do that, too, even to teach them, often to bewildered college kids who tended, at first, to side with my dad about poetry. Dad always insisted that if it didn't rhyme, it wasn't a poem. A bit like him, my oldest sister claimed that she knew what her punishment would be if she went to hell: "a book of unmeltable poetry."

Yet....

When her young son took his life, she, a reclusive homemaker, quilter, and gardener, found a poem by Emily Dickinson, one of Mother's favorite writers, and mine. Peg had bought the collection for Mother's June birthday and had apparently thumbed through it.

I stayed in David's room my next visit, and on his chest of drawers, I found this—copied in pencil, in Peg's neat hand, on a recipe card:

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of Industries
Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

I never mentioned the poem, nor did Peg. But we both understood, as did our mother, her mother, and all those who ever wrote or read poems, that poetry—art—brings the truth--tragic, funny, grotesque, or lovely--straight to our hearts and minds and souls, wherever we may be.

It acknowledges and centers all that all of us are but cannot, ourselves, otherwise quite know or say.

Adult Fiction—First Place

From the Solomon To Paradise

by Nila LeRea Denton, Stockton

As she adjusted the veil, the bride to be turned her gaze out her bedroom window, immediately spying the nearby Paradise Creek gently flowing by and then suddenly, for no special reason, she remembered a memory of a time that had occurred a few years before, along another water stream, this time the Solomon River near her uncle's farm.

One that other day, a brisk fall afternoon, she sat among the falling leaves, beside the river, watching the water flow by, her stare almost hypnotized in nature. Long brown hair framed her face, a lovely face, shining fully as a reflection of her youth, a young woman just blooming.

At the sound of a twig breaking, the young woman startled, swung around only to find a man, a young man near her own age, casually dressed, nonchalantly standing nearby, his hands tucked into his pockets. Fear surged

through her for this was an isolated river bend, ten miles east of the town of Solomon. And she was alone. Or so she had assumed until this stranger suddenly came upon her.

She thought what should she say? Should she scream? No one was around to hear her, thinking in near panic. So timidly, however trying not to appear afraid, she hesitantly said, "Hello, sir," as she fidgeted with the folds of her long skirt. Looking up, she saw the young man intently watching her, with a twinkle in his eyes and a brilliant smile stretching across her face. He quietly replied, "Be not afraid, miss. I mean you no harm. May I please join you for a few minutes?" Clearly waiting for her response, which she gave him in a slight nod and with a shy smile. He then sat down on the blanket of newly fallen leaves, what she noticed was a respectable distance away from her.

"If I may ask, it seemed to me you were having serious thoughts as you gazed at the Solomon just now. Is it something I might help you with? I am a good listener.. or so I've been told."

The girl turned slightly to view the young man. She was trying to decide if he was sincere or not. He gave no indication otherwise, so she turned her head back to look at the river, and spoke, "I was thinking about my grandfather, Fredrick. You see I have never met him. He came from Germany to America with his family, my grandmother and their six children. From New York, they traveled on an immigration train to this area to see my grandmother's brother.

While they were here, my grandfather was knocked out of a boat by a limb and drowned, somewhere here along the Solomon River. After a time, my grandmother and her four sons, my father Fred the oldest among them, moved west. By then, the two daughters had married so they did not continue further with their family.

After a time, my grandmother and her four sons all filed homesteads along another water way, the Paradise Creek. And that's where my father met my mother. They courted literally on horseback, were married and had 11 children." Smiling, she continued, "I am number nine."

The young man shook his head knowingly. "Thinking about your grandfather. He must have been a special man." Nodding her head, the young woman replied, "Yes. I guess he was although I do not know much about him. It's just sad he died in the prime of his life. Not seeing the fulfillment of bringing his family and settling in this new land. Leaving all behind in Germany, just to die... in this river," she said as she frowned at the water. "And, I am named after him. I am Freda, you see."

"Yes," said the young man, "I see before me a lovely young lady who loves her family, even those family members she has never had the opportunity to meet. And even though your grandfather never saw his dream fulfilled does not mean it did never happened. I am sure he was confident he and his wife had raised four strong young men, most capable to capture and live the American dream. And as a wise man once said, 'Life in us is like the water in a river.' Your grandfather's blood flows through your veins. So also, as the water flows down this river, the very river in which he died, so your grandfather's legacy lives on through you and your family. He did not die in vain. He lived, and he still lives on because of you.

And just as the tributaries, the North Fork Solomon and the South Fork Solomon surrender their water into this river, the main stem Solomon, so also your family is stronger because you all pull together to your source, your family, the river of your life."

The girl's sad expression lifted, shifting from a frown to a slight turning up of her lips. She then straightened, feeling comfort and strength because of his words. "Yes, I believe you are right," she said in reflection. Then with more confidence, "I know you are right. Thank you for helping me understand."

Softly spoken, she heard his next words, "I'm sure your grandfather would be very proud of you. And who knows? I have a feeling you will meet him one day. Gott segne Sie (God bless you), Fred-a." The last words barely above a whisper.

Immediately, she turned towards the young man, but he was gone. Even the leaves he had sat upon looked undisturbed. Her heart pounded rapidly as she laid her hand lightly upon her chest, catching her breath, and then she rose, adjusting her skirt, brushing off the crushed leaves on which she had sat. Then turning west, she started walking the short distance down the trail along the river bank, back to her uncle's house where her family awaited her.

Now years later, it was her wedding day. Why then was she thinking about meeting this young man? She had often wondered if he was really her grandfather, a vision or an angel, because of his sudden appearance and then abrupt disappearance. No matter. She'd never know for sure.

She did know, though, that today she would take her wedding vows along the Paradise Creek. Had she, like her family, truly found paradise here? Maybe. But just as someone would later say "Love, like a river, will cut a new path whenever it meets an obstacle." Their family's obstacle? The death of their patriarch. Their family's new subsequent path? A new path of enduring family love, starting not far from the Rhine River in Germany, across the Atlantic Ocean to the Solomon River in America, then blazing a trail to free land near the Paradise.

However, the influence of water on their family did not end with the Paradise. Unknowingly, the family had settled just a few miles south from the headwaters of yet another tributary of the South Solomon River, the Medicine Creek, where two generations later, other family descendants would live. The waters of the Solomon River truly now depicted a circle of renewed hope and life for this one pioneer family and their descendants.