"Seeking to encourage and recognize excellence in creative writing."

Award Winning
Poetry, Short Stories &
Nonfiction

2012 - 2013
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2012 - 2013 Regional Writing Awards

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Regional Poetry
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Moonstruck

We walked last night Kate and I
over a wide and moonlit land.
We chased our shadows, had them dance
and made puppets with our hands.
Watched Venus speed to her home in the west
held each other against the chill
spoke remarkable words we would soon forget
but of the shadows we never will.

by G. Daniel Ackerman • Wooster
Guidelines for Nirvana

I seem to be stacks of puffy pancakes tethered syrupy to earth, but really I’m a grand-slam sushi, wasabi-snuggled for all it’s worth.

If Sandhills crabapple jelly is the zeitgeist discernment looks like a flea comb.

Bluegrass fiddle plays a topsy-turvy world.

Green sky above, white clouds below.

Carry wood, chop water.

Spirit? She will some day play like that.

Discernment tastes like a fizzy drink.

Allah akbar! prayed a thousand ways.

When things reach critical mass discernment sounds like “Ode to Joy.”

If you sit very still the sneaky animal will find you.

Thomas Merton reached the redwoods hemitage gobsmacked. Discernment smells like fir trees on a foggy morning.

Fiddle floats a purple note.

Silence feels like a down quilt.

Prayer flags help you stumble out of fog.

Discernment is a calm drink, drunk luke-cold.

by Sue Spirit • West Salem
The Contrast

Excess words form novels
with rivers of white spaces
meandering up pages
only to separate like deltas
that spread words
in a northward migration.

Poetry is a soul dig.
Each thought layer
peeled away,
core exposed.
A poem appears
spare, complete,
no rivers but maybe
a creek or two.

by Darlene Mullett • Doylestown
Award Winning
Regional Short Stories
2012 - 2013
Crossing the Wire

The sun was a thought, maybe a promise, in the just dawning morning sky. Hector woke before his alarm, not unusual on an important day, and sat up in bed, testing his back. He grimaced a bit, at the crunching sound that followed, but no pain cursed him. Today was a good day, a rare day. He looked at his still sleeping wife, Maria, and slowly stood, feeling the familiar ache in all the joints that had been damaged, broken, then hard wired back together. Aches he could live with. They gave testament to his trials.

Coffee brewed while he fried several eggs, made toast, then sat outside on his wooden deck, to eat his breakfast and contemplate the day. A big day; one that could make other days better. He heard his wife in the kitchen, though it was still early, and smiled a little that she did not bother him. By now, she knew the ritual, new when his nerves needed soothed, or left alone. She was one of God’s rare gifts to him.

Later, when he left, he had given her a small kiss, and held her for a brief moment. She was a small woman, yet they stood eye level to each other, and the concern in her dark eyes made his heart hitch. Be careful. They said softly, while her words simply told him she would see him later. That she would of course bring their son and that she loved him. He left then, his duffel slung over a shoulder, his stride even as he made his way to the truck that stood in his drive. And then he was gone, on the road, never a look back.

Work for Hector had never seemed like the work other men carried. Work was cut into segments of his life, small seconds that had grown into a career. His education had not been in a college, but rather through calloused bleeding hands and broken bones, when even as a teenager he had followed his own father’s precedent. Now, he pulled into the palm tree lined road that led to the place he had grown up in, and had known as home when a child. He walked the still, quiet pavement to the lit barns, felt the electric charge in the air, like static before a storm. Hector was good at feeling emotion, without words spoken. It was what made him so excellent in his life’s work, a gift from his father that money could never have bought. The one thing
about himself he allowed pride in.

Shed rows beckoned, as he approached the only one that mattered. Already the light was on in the stall, and the soft snuffling of horse greeted him as he dropped his duffel and walked quietly to the door. The mare greeted him instantly, lowering an elegant head set on a long slender neck. The dark eyes were restless, curious, and he did not disappoint her. He pulled a peppermint from his jeans pocket; let her lick it from his palm, even as she tossed her head in complaint that there were no more. Then she went back to the net of hay that readied her for the day. He slipped inside the stall, nodded at the black man who straightened from the long legs he had been wrapping. Billy Jay smiled at Hector, his gap toothed grin genuine, as always.

“You ready for today Hector?” The smaller man smiled, nodded his head.

“Si. What matters is that she is.” Billy Jay ran a broad hand over the mare’s tall back, and her coat gleamed under his touch and care, his love.

“She ready. There no question ‘bout that.” The large man’s eyes showed a concern, questioning.

“Your back ok boss?” Hector tilted his head.

“I am good as new, Billy. Good as new.”

Growing up with a single father, one of the best grooms in California, Hector had begun rubbing horses, grooming them, when he was only ten years old. His father had been well known enough that the trainers had humored his tiny son, taken him beneath their wings, and given him chances. He had worn holes into his sneakers hot walking horses, grown patience in his soul as he handled creatures ten times his size, with an internal fire hotter than the sun. Hector’s father had been a large man, not in breadth but in height, and when it became clear that Hector would remain small, minute in stature, a new chance arose. A chance his father had outgrown years before. Life was strange like that, one minute the father’s lost dream, the next a dream that landed on a son’s shoulders that many white Americans would have despaired in. Hector was never to play football or basketball. Rather, in the Mexican spiritualism of his father’s family and heritage, Hector would
develop an empathy with horses that outlived his physical strength. He had broken more bones than he could remember; feet, legs, shoulders and hands. The last had been a bad fall. A big rather clumsy colt that tripped on his own legs coming down a turf track and crested head over croup to fall on the tiny man still riveted to the horse’s back. Hector’s spine had snapped like a dried piece of timber. He had known, had heard it inside his head, the way many did when badly damaged. Like when ligaments had torn, the audible internal pop that signified danger. His fall had been eight months before. Today was his last chance. His first race since the accident, for the same two men who had seen him fall with their big colt. Whether it was guilt that led them to this last chance, or their belief in him, Hector could not say. But as in all things that mattered, the reason for his being there was not what mattered. What mattered was Hector’s son at home. Hector’s promise, to both himself, and his family. What mattered was the ultimate goal in the game that ruled his life. Crossing the wire.

Later, dressed in silks of red and sparkling white, Hector walked with head up, and pride in check. He had faced himself in the locker room mirror, contemplated his lined face, with more crinkles from smiling, than lines from frowning. To him, that spoke of a successful life. Now Hector fell into fourth place in line behind the other jocks that led the way. Along the sidelines, his eyes found what he longed to see; His tiny wife in her best dress, holding the handles of the wheelchair that his tiny son rode. His son’s eyes lit up at the sight of his father. Hector approached and kissed Maria, then crouched to look his son in the eyes and smile and kiss his face. His ten year old son that would never know the width of a thoroughbred’s back, or the feeling of air slicing his face like a razor as he thundered down the final stretch. His birth defect had prohibited all of this. Yet he never relented. His belief in his father, his hero, and in watching his father fly was what fed his young heart and simultaneously kept his father’s alive. “Econtrar sus a ala papa” Find her wings papa...his son said with a big smile.

Hector heard nothing but the
rustling of silks as he approached the tall red mare that stood in the California sun, head up and eyes ablaze. The trainer stood back, while Billy Jay held the line, soothing the dancing mare with words no one understood but the simple black man and the mare with trembling muscles. As the trainer coached him with words of advice, of direction, Hector listened with head bowed. He knew this horse. It was not the first time he had ridden her. It was, however, their first race. Then he was being tossed upon the broad back, feeling the emotion course through the horse and into his soul. He touched the emotion, cradled it inside, and turned her fear into happiness. As they paraded to the post, his words became a chant, and he sang them in a soft octave to the fire beneath him.

“llamas hermosa” He sang softly… beautiful flame…He held one hand on the reins and another on the mare’s shoulder, his fingers tapping a rythym only he and the horse could feel. A rhythm only they could understand. His gift came through him, and Hector felt it course through him and out his fingers like an electric pulse not meant to excite but to soothe. He lifted his face to the hot California sun, felt it as the love of a God he had never forsaken; felt tears in his eyes that he was back inside his dream. They approached the gate, and he quickly genuflected, thanking God for the chance. Inside the gate, the smell of metal clung to his nostrils, a smell so sharp he could almost taste it, much like blood. All sounds left him then. He wrapped the silk mane around his fingers, crouched low, braced himself, much as he imagined a pilot would do before barreling nose down through the clouds.

Bells rang, and the thrust forward was tremendous. He braced himself with the reins, felt the pull of 1200 pounds of coiled tension. Not yet… not yet….not yet… Surrounding him, thunder was close, horseshoes clanged and there was no daylight. Dirt found his face around his goggles, stinging like a hundred bees, yet he didn’t notice. All that mattered was the pull, the eagerness and the living storm beneath him.

Around the first turn and still tied in a pack, searching for daylight, searching for a chance. The trainer’s words left him, as they always did,
though he would never tell anyone that truth. His own internal voice was compass enough, and had never failed him. The second turn came, and there it was, that little patch of light and that internal voice that whispered. Now.

A nudge of rein, a slight lean and the mare responded, needling herself in between the big boys, the colts that normally would outrun a filly. But she was nimble, this beautiful flame of his, and he wove his way through and came out the other side. He leaned closer, felt her mane whip his face... vayase volando me llevan a casa... fly away...take me home.

Faster they ran, past the big colts who began to tire, past the stands where people now cheered...and he whispered it to the mare, animar para usted...They cheer for you...the final turn, the stretch, gaining on the black and white silks of the lead. Still faster...faster...he did not feel the metal helping to hold his joints together. Hector did not feel the chronic pain that cursed him. He felt God, and the sun, and the whipping mane on his face. He felt alive.

A whip was never raised, the only encouragement the giving of rein, the release of brakes that man had placed on this God tuned animal. He felt her joy, her happiness at being allowed to run. To follow the predestined ordainment that had been bred into her for centuries, trained into her for months, and hand woven by a tiny Mexican man that many would have written off years ago. Hector blinked the tears from his eyes, whispered a thanks that only God and equine heard, and finally felt the wings sprout proverbially from the broad flaming back. And as he thundered alone, still gaining speed, he felt the release few men do at the realization of his life's dream. The culmination was real. So he thought, as he found himself crossing the wire.
Award Winning
Regional Nonfiction
2012 - 2013
First Place - Nonfiction

The Case Against Sparrows

The sparrows have returned to the empty wooden box where they were fledged, but they are orphans now - mother dead by a cat, father vanished, his nest cleaned out by our hands.

I want to tell them we are trying again for bluebirds. I want to tell them to go away so the timid blue and orange pair can move in. But how to speak sparrow to those who know only a chattering song?

Attempts to oust the sparrows only frighten the bluebird couple; one finds neither logic nor reason in bird-land, only reactive behavior and coded whistles whose meaning escapes us except at obvious moments of courting and combat. The brown, striped females and the noisome male are more persistent than the larger birds we favor. Braver, more ruthless, they think nothing of throwing bluebird eggs from their boxes and nesting in them!

The sparrows are really European weaver-finches brought here in the 19th century. Without our noticing they have taken over the cities, fields, and woods where they are invisible or at least ignored. Perhaps they deserve the nest space—again their ownership of the box is complete, and they have filled it to the round hole with yet another cone of feathers and straw. But summer flies and we must make them start over, foolishly hoping they will finally be discouraged. Guiltily, I begin tearing apart their latest nest.

Do our wan, blue wards deserve this help? Aren't we tampering with Darwin’s laws, Malthus’ theories of population? Are we shaking the trees in Eden? Every time we put on eyeglasses, take a pill, visit a doctor, vaccinate a child, we tread upon natural laws. Our Mother would never select a weakling in any aspect—She knows we are ruining species with compassion. Why prefer a bluebird over a sparrow? Roses over dandelions? The sparrows have returned to the box where they were fledged. Who will tell them we want bluebirds, only bluebirds?

by Joseph McLaughlin • Dover
I have always been enamored by names. By names, I mean the title affixed to something, someone or someplace that transcends the given moniker of the object, the person or the place.

When I moved to Holmes County many moons ago, I immediately picked up on the custom of speaking in this sort of colloquial code that was neither an accent nor a dialect. People spoke of names for places as if the entire world knew to what and where they were referring. Often times, most of those names could not be found on any official document, including a county map.

Still, people used the names as reference points, meeting places and settings for stories, imaginary and true. With apologies to Stephen Colbert, the “truthiness” of the tale didn’t really matter.

In my teaching days, my elementary students matter-of-factly offered up perfect examples of what I mean. When I asked the students where they lived, I got answers like “on French Ridge” or “next to Dingle Brown” or “beside Blackbird Croskey.”

Once I caught on to this provincial name-dropping, I tried turning the tables on the kids through the lessons. They found it downright sacrilegious to learn that Glenmont had once been Napoleon and Killbuck was first Oxford.

Nor did they believe me when I told them that Fort Fizzle had really been a fort, and the cause of its rebellious caretakers actually did fizzle. It was an insignificant skirmish in the American Civil War. But it was our own.

The cute terminology wasn’t confined to the schoolhouse either. Once, when I reported to the fire station after the alarm had sounded, I found the first two trucks gone and the station empty. I checked the chalkboard where the type of run and its location were hastily scribbled. “Grassfire, Baddow Pass” was all it said.

I was stumped. I had no idea where that was, and had to wait until

Enamored By Names continued on page 11
another volunteer showed up to find out which way we should go.

The name game even spilled over to church. When the youth group wanted to go on a hayride to Panther Hollow, I again had to ask about the exact location. When we got there, it was so spooky I thought it should be named Ghost Hollow. But I soon learned that was actually on the north side of the nudist camp. And no, I am not making up any of this.

When I moved to the eastern part of the county, I discovered the local names just as prolific, if not more so. Amid the Amish and Mennonite culture, several people have the same name. But there was only one Bicycle Dan and one Toothpick Andy.

We had our church picnic in Troyer’s Hollow. The Stink Plant sits on Weaver Ridge. Good friends live on Joe T. hill.

In the western, more Appalachian area of the county, the hills are steeper and the valleys are wider. In the east, with its more gently rolling hills, the tranquil valleys are referred to as bottoms.

A young woman was once talking with a small group of people about what each valley was called. She said she lived in Bulla Bottom, and that the valley on the north side of Walnut Creek was called Genza (or Goose) Bottom.

She promptly turned to a young man who lived over the next ridge, and innocently asked him, “And what is your bottom called?”

Like I said, I love these earthy, rural names rich in traditions and full of life, goodness and virtue.
Tending Our Treasures

I spend the hours from 3 pm to 11 p.m. five days a week working in a nursing home. Located downtown in an older building, the home consists of several separate wings that were tacked onto the original structure at various times. The whole assemblage is shoehorned into an impossibly small space between a church and a parking lot. Walking by on the sidewalk outside, I would never guess that a building so narrow and compact could hide a warren of hallways and rooms housing 75 beds.

Each room is small, however. We aides are forever moving and shifting physical objects in order to get our work done: roll the bedside table into the hallway so we can fit the wheelchair beside the bed, collapse the walker so it can slide next to the closet to make room for the bedside commode. This means that no resident can have very much in the way of personal possessions; there simply isn’t room.

For some this makes no difference. They have already, due to brain damage or Alzheimer’s, withdrawn quite far from the outside world where such things are significant. But for other residents it matters intensely, and it’s obvious they faced tough choices when they decided what to bring with them when they moved here. With life pared down to the essentials, it’s easy to see what each person’s treasures are, what matters most to each one.

Harvey’s treasures are three tomato plants growing in pots in the courtyard. He can’t lug a full watering pitcher when he shuffles out there with his walker, so he grabbed me one day to ask if I could water them. The next day he caught me as soon as I came on the floor to ask if I could mix up some fertilizer to put on them. Two days later he wanted each plant tied to the support stake in its pot. Three times that day as I passed through the solarium he called me over to where he was sitting to show me the narrow brown twine that he had in the pouch that velcroed onto his walker. “That’s what we’ll tie them up with,” he whispered conspiratorially. And two days after that he asked me, “Do

Tending Our Treasures continued on page 13
you know how to pinch suckers off tomato plants?” “You bet,” I told him, and snuck out to do the job during a rare lull in the action before the supper trays came up. “You missed one,” he told me later, “but I got it.”

Dale’s treasures are mementoes from his time in the service, the most memorable years of his life. One day he showed me a letter from the Veteran’s Administration informing him that he will receive a $200 bonus check soon. Then he proudly opened his wallet to show me his military driver’s license. “I’ve had that since 1971.” He went on to list for me all the places he saw while he was in the army. They were mostly German towns. I was silently wondering how he missed Vietnam when he spoke again to describe the morning they told him he would be going to Europe rather than Asia. “Were you relieved?” I asked him and Dale grinned at me. “Me and 150 other guys.”

Patty’s treasure is a framed photograph of her with with her sister and extended family, taken in happier days when Patty was in better health. I walked into her room one afternoon to find her wheelchair pulled up to the dresser and Patty cradling the picture in her lap. “Is that you?” I asked, pointing at the figure that most closely resembled her. She nodded and proceeded, in the slow and laboriously vague and clumsy way of talking that I’ve come to know as “post stroke speech” to name the other inhabitants of the photograph as she pointed to each one. “What a beautiful family,” I told her. Ever since then, when I tuck Patty in bed at night and lean down to kiss her cheek she reaches up with both arms and hugs me, hard. And most nights she makes an intense effort to produce three halting syllables: “Love you too.”

Sheila’s treasures seem to be her cigarettes, which she is required by state law to smoke out in the courtyard, and which she is always reluctant to relinquish. Even on the evening severe thunderstorms, with lightning, hail and high winds, forced us to close down the smoking corner early and bring the smoking residents inside to their rooms, Sheila clung
the longest to her half-empty pack and her lighter and her hope that the weather would clear before she was asleep so that she could smoke one more.

Sandy’s treasures are her pain pills, the narcotics the nurses dole out to her each shift and which are the only thing that make her days close to bearable. Multiple sclerosis has robbed Sandy of almost everything but pain and her beautiful smile, and even that smile is beginning to desert her. Most days she can only moan “Oh God” over and over again or sob quietly and a smile is beyond her reach, but I see it every now and then. Often when I walk by her wheelchair in the solarium her hands reach out towards me in a supplicating gesture and if I slow down long enough to grasp them and squeeze and look in her eyes, a dazzling smile flashes across her face, a reminder of the vital and compelling woman she must once have been. It slips away quickly, though, and leaves Sandy with her twisted body and her pain and the long, lonely minutes to be endured until the nurse comes around with her med cart again.

Alice’s treasures are the photographs tacked to the cork board in her room, and her memories, and both are fading fast, her memories in reverse chronological order. When I asked her about a picture of her sitting on a couch with a man, his arm around her shoulders and her hand resting comfortably on his thigh, she puzzled over it a moment, brow furrowed, before confessing to me, “I don’t know who that is.” But when I pointed to a similar photograph from probably forty years earlier, with a much younger Alice posing with a youthful version of the man from the later picture, she told me, with pride and the relief of one who has finally found her way back home to a place that is safe and familiar, “Now that’s my husband.” I told her he was a handsome man and she nodded her agreement until her eyes strayed to the more recent photo, foreign and troubling territory to her, and the puzzlement returned to her faced as she repeated, “I don’t know who that is.”

Lois seems to value her remote control above all else. Most days
when I come on duty she is perched regally on her bed, the head of it raised so that she’s in a sitting position. Everything is arranged precisely on the bed and bedside table—box of Kleenex, call light, cup of ice water, telephone, Bible and rosary beads, pen and pad of paper—but she usually clutches the remote control in her hand. It’s not immediately clear why she needs to do this because her television, which is always on and loud, is almost always on the same channel, Turner Classic Movies. She seems to feel more secure with the control in her hand, even if she seldom uses it. When Lois passed out and fell unconscious on the steps outside her sister’s house, breaking her hip, she lost control of almost everything in her world, from her checking account to her bladder. She is slowly regaining control of her limbs in her daily physical therapy sessions. During the rest of the day her remote seems to hold for her the promise that she can still control something and order it to suit her taste.

My time working here has taught me a lot, and has compelled me to examine how I keep my own treasures. I have learned to choose them carefully and to take good care of the things I value most. And I have also learned not to hold them too tightly. Life has a way of removing them from us, and I have observed that the happiest among the people I care for are those like Harvey, with his tomato plants, who can adapt to circumstances not solely by clinging to treasures from a former phase, but by finding new treasures, however fleeting, and tending them with love.

by Mary Ann Lieser • Wooster