

Today the fence is supposed to be working. Again. I run the goat gauntlet THREE TIMES!!! I check and double check everything that could go wrong. I huff and puff to catch my breath, and I sweat rivers.

I blew. It was not a pretty sight. I wished I were Superman and could yank on the nearest post and watch the entire fence pop out - bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop, bloop - one post after the other, all the way around the field. Oh, it would have been so gratifying.

This mess might have gone on longer, except for one little thing, The next day it rained! The electric fence works real good now, whether it's ON or OFF.

Music of the earth

First my kids, then my
grandkids, my little ones learned
early not to bring their own
noise with them when walking
the fields with me. We learned
together to listen to nature's
own song, the perfect harmonies
of the earth.

Utter silence...

I'm on my way to the goat pen with a flake of hay in my arms when I notice. It's that fleeting, peace-filled moment of the morning. It is compelling, and I stand perfectly still to be part of it.

That brief still moment steals up so quietly. Framed on both sides by the noise of daytime, it is this contrast to the frenetic activity that catches my attention.

Before it comes, cars and pickups first rush up and down the road as people race off to work. Dust is thrown up from the gravel road, and waves of it lap at the countryside. Bird families cluster in the trees and fenceline briars, trilling and cheeping their joy of another new dawn.

Dogs yip, screen doors slam, school buses growl all the way to the school grounds. I've fed the dogs and MyKeeper, in that order. (Yes, he complains about that.) Each goat has munched her morning grain ration at the stanchion. The water trough is

re-filled. A handful of alfalfa and an apple quarter are stuffed into each rabbit hutch. The dogs get their biscuit reward for not running off while I was busy with the goats. They have no idea how much I appreciate that.

At this moment, the dogs are sprawled on the ground, which was frosty earlier, but is steaming in the sun. The goats are lounging and taking their leisure re-digesting their breakfast.

This moment holds me arrested in action. There is no wind, no sound, only a warm sun and a few seconds tied together and frozen in time. I soak it up and commit the feel of it to my memory files for later.

From this nest of silence, Bunny's nose twitches. Lydia the Lady Mockingbird watches me from her favorite "good morning" fencepost. A leaf falls, crinkling as it skitters along the ground. A weed seed bursts, and after a pause, another. The squirrel chitters, and I catch a glimpse of his flicking tail. A crow calls from a pecan tree in the distance. Farther off, a car whooshes by on the paved road a half-mile away.

This moment could have slipped past without my noticing. What an awful thought. HisMama comes to mind, and the words she left me for moments like this: "Little is much, if the Lord is in it."

Goat at Giglio's

O titled laborer

O goat of great
significance

no junkyard caprine

but a high calling -

weed control

in a fenced yard -

a guard goat of

experience and

exemplary

qualifications.

Far From Town

Lazy air glides across smooth hills
lounges in the clefts, tiptoes the ridges
then stands stock still, a mid-morning
quiet I wait to hear. Once the schoolbus
growls off into the distance, the critters
are fed, everyone's off to work, then
even the wind takes a well-earned break.
From that matrix pops a staccato bark,
a seed pod burst, a ruffle of breeze
traipsing the tip tops of tall trees.
I lean against the fence, just listening,
the dog at ease beside me.
Even the brush of clothing, or fingers
through hair is rude intrusion.
Hush. Echo the stillness.
No sound but the ring of silence.

The anointing storm...

Booms and crashes and crackles made a terrible racket overhead while I sat scrunched in a big chair, wringing my hands and fretting. The TV was tuned to the weather report, as was the radio. Clutched in my hand was a hastily scrawled sketch mapping out the Big Country counties. A flashlight lay beside me, right next to the dogs who were quivering as I was.

I wished I could wiggle my nose and find myself back in Seattle where the worst is mists and fogs and three-day drizzles, all dreary and grey.

The storm oozed in like slime, pointed north by the long finger of a cold-front cloud.

New residents, we didn't yet know how to read Texas storm language, so we had watched during the afternoon while the front dragged the storm clouds across the blue sky, erasing the puffy white clouds as it came.

Dense clouds packed together until they had to wrestle for space. By late afternoon, there was no

sun left, only a dark brooding sky and buzzards tickling the underbellies of the heavy, low-slung clouds.

In no mood for play, the storm howled, enraged, and threw flashing daggers. Thunder roared and lightning blazed the miles across the heavens, lighting cloud profiles in split-second flickers.

The lightning was constant, leaping from cloud to cloud and jabbing at the earth. I had never seen anything like it, so I was staying up late with the weatherman, tracking the storm as it bellowed its way over the Big Country.

The brute emerged from the south, a bear on the rampage with nothing to stop it from sweeping across this wide flat land. Then it loomed overhead and pounded out its fury, so loud I couldn't hear the radio at all.

A last shred of bravery sent me dashing down the hall to wake MyKeeper. He can sleep through anything. All he said was "ummph" and "frmmph" and "Go back to sleep," until...BANG!!!...right outside the south window.

"I'm awake!" he sputtered, lurching bolt upright. A second later - BOOOOOM!! Another direct hit to the ground on the north side. It was so close I heard the sizzle and smelled something burn. And another sharp awful smell I later heard might be ozone.

"So," I blurted, "we're still alive. I guess this is Welcome To Texas, sung by a massive, marching chorus!"

We'd been anointed on the right and on the left. In the frenzy of battle, we had heard the voice of the great sovereign. We'd felt the flat edge of the sword tap our shoulders as the thunderous voice intoned, "You are hereby dubbed West Texans, if you're brave enough to dare."

Living on eagle time...

Morning person that I am, it is my custom to open all the drapes and curtains so I can watch dawn approach from every angle.

One morning I reached for the drapery pull at our front picture window. A car was stopped out in the road, so I waited a few minutes. The car was still there when I returned. A man leaned out the driver's window, staring at the house.

It felt a bit creepy. I lurked behind the curtains, waiting for him to move on. But he didn't.

MyKeeper said my suspicions were silly. Maybe the guy had a flat tire.

In the big city where I grew up, we were taught young to beware of strangers. This qualified as strange. "But what if he's casing the joint?" I persisted with one worry after another. "What if he's a kidnapper?"

"Oh, don't worry," he assured me. "Soon as he'd get you in the light, he'd bring you right back." Bless

him, he does what he can to keep me from taking myself too seriously.

"Well, come and look," I pressured him.

He whisked the curtains aside. We stood staring back at the man in the car.

In the dimness of dawn's early light we could see the man put a shushing finger to his lips and point to the chimney, motioning for us to come out.

MyKeeper and I looked at each other, then crept out to the car, looking back over our shoulders and up to the roof. Perched on the peak of the roof was a beautiful eagle enjoying the view. It looked like a weather vane too big for the house.

The man talked to us in whispers. He said the bird had been there quite a few minutes. He had watched it land, and stayed while it preened its feathers and then searched the countryside for breakfast from the tip of our roof.

He talked about how few eagles had been sighted in recent years, and how the pheasant population was decimated as well. He answered our questions about the shiny washtubs set in the high branches of riverfront trees. He said it was a conservation program, inviting osprey to adopt them as nests. To everyone's surprise, they did.

A few minutes later the eagle decided he had attracted too much company. He unfolded his wings,

spread them with a dramatic flair, lifted up in a majestic sweep, and dwarfed the house in his glorious takeoff. We were awestruck, watching till he shrunk to a dot and disappeared.

The man was a commuter in a place where watching an eagle took precedence over rush hour. Life is much different on a county road. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Tanking up in Texas...

"Close up the shop!" the man yelled as he burst through the door. Since I just stood there, staring, he waved his arms. "Quick, lock the door and come with me! Bring your camera!"

Before I knew it, the "back in 10 minutes" sign was hung on the door, and the key was turning in the lock at the newspaper shop where I worked.

He turned his car into his neighbor's driveway. She was away, and missed it all. Draping the leaves and twigs of the old oaks were wads and wads of Monarch butterflies.

The man guided me through the butterfly rest haven. He rolled his arms in a gathering motion, attracting great round armloads to his chest. They did not panic, but simply rose back into place on the branch.

An aura of peace and reverence filled that place. I stood with my jaw open until he jogged my arm. "Take pictures!" he said.

I will never forget that scene, and now it's butterfly migration again. The delicate wings materialize out of nowhere, flutter overhead, and disappear - little dots headed south.

Their story is amazing. Late in September, when the weather tells them it's time, Monarchs leave their wide-spread northern habitat and funnel down to pinpoint spots in the Sierra Madre mountain range in Mexico. They tank up in Texas, the last feeding grounds, and head for their wintering place in that remote mountain forest.

There, they eat very little, until sometime in February. Instinct prods them to flex their wings and head north again.

While their strength lasts, they mate and then make a mad dash back to Texas. They are looking for the first signs of milkweed, and it is into March before they find the first of it here in the Abilene area.

They lay their eggs and guzzle nectar as they fan out on the widening migratory highway to the northeast US and into several provinces of Canada. Their progeny hatch, run through the processes of metamorphosis, emerge from their chrysalis, stretch their wet wings, and ride the wind currents northward. The swarms roost in the protective arms of leafy trees whenever the wind is too strong for

flight, or if the temperature falls below 60 degrees F.

Lepidopterists tag and trail Monarch journeys. From the Abilene area is Mrs. Ruth Addington. She refers to Dr. Chip Taylor at the University of Kansas, head of a Monarch Watch, and to Dr. Fred Urquhart, Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto who has been a world authority for 60 years. Bill Calvert heads the Monarch Watch in Texas.

Mrs. Addington says the Abilene Zoo is the first official Monarch Sanctuary on the butterfly trail to Mexico. The volunteer group worked for a year to achieve the rating, lobbied for months, and got the call from Austin on Saturday afternoon of the Memorial Day weekend, 1995. Their effort also claims the Monarch as the State Insect.

Monarch watchers are concerned for the survival of the species as more and more milkweed is lost. It is a weed, after all, and gets plowed under or sprayed away. The more than 30 varieties of milkweed are the mainstay of the Monarch's diet and reproductive cycle.

Butterfly gardens are one answer. Milkweed grows wild, but it is hard to make it grow under cultivation. Other butterfly yum-yums are lantana, buddleia, daisies, and sunflowers. Loving butterflies means you must also love caterpillars. It's a package

deal - the good, the bad, and the beautiful. And

according to butterfly lovers, worth the

preservation.

All the revealing research makes the Monarch

much less obscure, but no less mystical.

Storm's Coming...

Puffy clouds
crawl atop thermals,
hoist walrus bodies
out of the deeps, lie
lumpenly in the sun.
More clouds
jostle and bump,
press together,
bellow their walrus roars.
Angry clouds,
massive shadows with
sooty undersides,
block the sun, and
dripping sleek bodies
drench thirsty earth.

Myopic Skyline

The view is the view
until fog -
green slopes, and behind it
row after row of range,
brown peaked, and
finally snow capped peaks
in the back tier
The eyes reach for that far scape
Then the fog,
blotting out the distance
creeping in and out of
the closest slopes
A myopic look at the
near hills, a new skyline
etched in sharp relief,
unfamiliar, and by its rareness,
fascinating.

Music of a
country day

My nearest neighbor loved to
laugh and say I was on a very
long road to being a country girl.
If I've not succeeded, I've sure
enjoyed the trying.

Peanut butter contest...

Competition is good.

Punkin and Sweet Pea did well at the cross country meet last weekend. This is Sweet Pea's first year, and she was so intent on showing well that she sprinted the entire mile course. She was exhausted at the finish line, shaky and breathless, but she had challenged herself and finished well for her school. That's what counted for her.

MyKeeper has a bit of a competitive spirit too. He proves himself stronger than any ice cream scoop he's ever dipped into hard ice cream. To save the scoop, I do the dishing up.

MyKeeper competes with me, too. With words. He gets me to explain a word to him, and then he brews on it awhile. One unsuspecting day he'll toss one into a conversation - a word like obfuscate, peripatetic, or vituperous. It usually busts me up laughing, because he uses them in rather unexpected ways.