

Star light...

"Star light, star bright..." I whisper, staring at the dim object low in the sky. I figure it might be Jupiter or Venus, one, but I don't know for sure what floats up there so high above us. I stand in the silence while it gathers the evening dusk. More and more stars arrive to light up the night.

There is nothing anywhere like the Texas sky. This night sky makes me realize my homeland Pacific Northwest is losing its grip on me. I still miss blue waters, jagged mountains, ferry boats, and tall, tall trees. But then I step out the door and see the Big Dipper hanging just above the horizon, its handle tangled in a mesquite tree.

My first glimpse of a planet close up is still vivid in my mind. Years ago, a neighbor stargazer set up his telescope in the cool of a summer evening. All the porch-sitting parents and all the tag-playing kids lined up to view the texture and shadows of Mars. The neighbor told all of us kids about asteroid belts and constellations, and told us mythical stories about

The Bear and the guardian Orion. Our young minds wrangled with the concept of swirling nebulae and galaxies.

While we grew up, Seattle grew up. The Emerald City's night lights overshadowed the lights of the heavens. I always thought Abraham was lucky to be standing in desert darkness. Imagine. If he'd been told to count the stars above city lights, the tally of his descendants would have been only twenty or thirty. But the ancient story goes that the numbers boggled his mind. He must have been standing in a place like Texas where a million stars glitter and the Milky Way flings its tentacles across the sky.

This evening, I'm mesmerized by the approach of night — the kaleidoscope of color, the sound of earth's creatures preparing for bed, the first howls and buzzes of the night crew. The passion of oranges and reds fades to a peaceful purple. Then, there it is - the first twinkle pops out of darkness.

And so I begin the elementary rhyme, "Star light, star bright, first star I've seen tonight..." A quiet awe holds my gaze. The one star brightens in the darkening sky. It twinkles red. Hmmm. I don't remember a star that red at twilight.

I keep watching. The star seems to loom larger. Then I hear a hum. It becomes a rumble, and then a roar. Oh-oh. My evening star? It's an airplane.

Surprise to me!

The furniture's off limits
or so I'd always thought
till the Duchess, so persistent,
made sure I was well taught.
A Dachshund's perfect perch,
which I'd thought was on the floor,
turns out to be the pillow
on the couch.

"P" words...

"You kids are weirdos!"

"Gramma," Peanut retorted, "Go write a hundred times, "I will not call my grandchildren weirdos!"

Giggles and laughter filled the car.

Sweet Pea added her order: "Go copy dictionary words of praise and kindness!"

They doubled over with laughter.

I try to teach my grandchildren manners, consideration, sticking up for each other. Infringements result in various punishments. One is yelling, but I don't like to talk about that.

One that works is sitting in the middle of the living room floor. No TV, no phone, no talking to sisters, just thinking. I never tell them to go to their rooms anymore. It's too much fun in there for kids in these days of gadgets.

Another is to look up "P" words in the dictionary. There are some fabulous words under "P" - like punishment, picaresque, pugilistic, pellucid,

pulchritudinous. This is the punishment that is a gift, for life. My youngest daughter hated this assignment, but now she enjoys an expansive vocabulary as well as the memory of all those hours with a pencil.

I can just picture her very verbal 2-year-old a few years from now, starting out with a crayon and words like pet, pen, pin, Pooh, and party. He'd move on to words like pickle, pillow, paint, and pretzel, and end up with proud and promoted and paycheck and the inevitable payment. After all that, his Mama would end up on a pedestal.

Sometimes, the punishment is an essay on the subject. One of the kids loves this punishment way too much. She fills a page and brings it to me, then goes to write another, and often even a third paper on something like, "It is wrong to try to sneak more cookies past my grandmother, before dinner."

The worst punishment is the writer's-cramp-inducing, mind-numbing "write this sentence a hundred times." It is usually something like, "I will not call my sister Stupid ever again."

The page starts out with 12 or 13 lines written across from margin to margin. Then they re-define the problem and solve it like this: they start vertical columns down the page, "I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I, then "will-will-will-will," followed by "not-not-not-not-not..."

The lines slant, the writing gets either bigger or smaller, the margins grow wider. The pauses get longer and more frequent to shake out cramped fingers.

I show them how to hold the pencil and their hand so the flow is looser. They tell me that isn't natural, and they can't do it. I remind them to think of all the people before computers, even before typewriters, who had to write and write and write by hand.

Punkin and her sisters trade that askance glance that says *Gramma's* talking about the Jurassic age again.

So, we bumped along county roads into town, yesterday, driving one of the girls to a summer group activity. The three sisters were engaged in a loud argy-bargy about the brains of the family.

It was then I popped out with it. "My goodness, girls! You three are weirdos!"

Their eyes glittered with the pleasure of a vengeful thought as they pictured me bent over a paper and shaking camps out of my hand on the 79th line.

I'm around to train them in manners.

Sometimes, like yesterday, they remind me.

I do hope this means the discipline is effective and the message is sticking.

The "mountain" goats...

A friend in town told me about a family who knows what it's like trying to outsmart critters. MyKeeper and I had just admitted defeat to goats who outsmarted each and every attempt we made to keep them penned, including an electric fence.

These friends of hers lived in a house she described as "kind of a throwed together house." On one side the roof sloped down pretty close to the ground. It was nice for shading the interior against direct sun, but their pygmy goats in the yard figured out they could get onto the roof at that low point. The goats took to using it for a substitute mountain.

Ker-plink, ker-plink, ker-plinkety-plink. That's what the family heard from inside the house. Ker-plinkety, plink, plink, ker-plink. All day long. And all night long. They couldn't sleep through the sounds of caprine hooves tap-dancing through the ceiling on waves of quiet night air. Ways were designed to block the goats, thwart the goats, fence the goats, surprise the goats, trick the goats. Unsnatched, the

goats solved each dilemma as quickly as my sister solves Chinese puzzles.

It came to one of the family members to try something new. Not from the hardware store, but from the kitchen. The man chuckled and laughed out loud over the fine trick he was about to pull on those little bitty goats.

He set about his task, shooing the goats away every few seconds. Anyone who has worked around goats knows what this is like. Goat ears and legs and noses are in the way. They are curious critters. They like to "help." And the final cartoon frame always finds the goat wedged between the person and the project.

The man started working several feet up that sloped roof, went clear across from one side to the other, back and forth, moving the ladder, carrying his supplies, lower and lower until he finished painting the bottom tier at the lowest edge of the roofline.

The goats were waiting in a row for him to finish and leave. It was obvious they were eager to investigate and figure a way around the man's newest trick. They still had a few tricks up their sleeves, too, and were pretty sure they could undo his hours of work in just a few clever minutes.

The goats were wrong.

They thronged to the edge of the roof as soon as the man carried his ladder away. The man came back and swooped away his bucket and his paintbrush. The goats lined up beneath the roofline and craned their necks. Several of them stretched out a tentative hoof, sniffed the edge of the roof, licked the strange stuff with obvious disdain, and snorted - big sneezy kinds of snorts that translate, "That's disgusting!"

But they didn't go away.

Undaunted, they backed up a little and flew at the low roofline.

The first one airborne landed, PLOP, in a heap and a tangle of legs. One after the other, the goats' sure-footed hooves failed them and they slumped to the ground.

They took turns and tried over and over again, hating to concede defeat.

The man stood at a distance and watched, a satisfied grin smearing across his face as he watched the goats gather at the water trough, heads down in embarrassment.

An ingenious solution. There is no end to the things a man can think up when pushed to the limit.

He used lard.

Slippery, slimy, slidy lard, painted on the lower reaches of the roof. It lasted for days, through rain

and sun, just long enough to convince the goats. After a while it melted away, but the goats never tried to jump onto the roof again.

Rack up one small, hard-fought point for The Man!

Music of the wild things

My corner bird preserve, just
outside my living room window,
taught me this:

All you need is a branch and a
bird bath — birds will come.
Then I have to chase away the
eighteen neighborhood cats.

This excites the dogs to a
neighborhood choral frenzy. It's
best for me not to meddle.

Wild goose chase...

The goose was not nice. We inherited him from some people who moved out of the neighborhood. The goose took the abandonment as a personal rejection, played out his fury on us.

Our neighbors next door had pleasant, cooing grey geese who ate out of their hands, groomed them with gentle bills, and waddled after them all through the orchard.

The white goose in our pen squawked his disgust at our approach, and snapped at us.

No matter how often we tried, he never accepted our attempts to befriend him. The kids tossed weeds and seeds and bread crumbs over the fence for him. We filled his water bowl and his pool with the hose, staying well back from the fence. The only civility we saw in him was what seemed like appreciation when we hosed him down. He liked a cool shower, and it mellowed him for a minute or two.

We pretty much left him on his own after a while. If he ever had a name, I sure don't remember it now. The only friend he had in the world was the little Mallard duck that grew up with him. The duck would quietly quack-quack-quack and waddle back and forth in mediation of our disagreements. It was a full-time job for the duck, soothing the goose's ruffled feathers and apologizing to us for the bad behavior.

The goose got loose once.

From the doorway I noticed MyKeeper trying to catch him. The goose led him in a great serpentine race around the field. MyKeeper was nowhere near closing the distance between them, but he was getting winded.

It looked like he could use some help. I ran at the goose to turn him back. I flapped my arms and clapped my hands and dashed straight towards him.

The goose started to turn back. MyKeeper was catching up. He had both hands stretched out for the goose's neck, and his eyes were set with grim focus. But the goose did a double- take and recognized it was only me.

In a flash, he lowered his head, stretched out his neck, and came at me with doubled speed. Rage fanned his great wings and he flung himself after me with a ferocious scowl narrowing his eyes.

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Awwwk!!!" I screeched. I turned and ran flat out fast, yelling back to MyKeeper, "Don't you let that goose get me!"

MyKeeper stopped running and fell to his knees, laughing and gasping for air.

"I was trying to help you, you traitor!!" I hollered behind me.

That awful goose is long gone, but MyKeeper asks me to this day, "You sure you wouldn't like to get a pet goose?"

Mid-winter visitor...

Passing through the living room, something out the window caught my eye. It was a calf in the driveway. Livestock gets loose all the time up in the high pastures of Eastern Washington. I wondered whose it was. Most likely it was lured by the aroma of a hay-filled barn. I didn't know if he was choosing ours, or just testing the air for the best hay in the neighborhood.

Our driveway was a long one, so the next time I walked past the window, the calf was only a little closer to the house. Since he was still there after all that time, I called Cally up the hill to see if she knew of anyone with a calf out.

Cally knew everyone on the hill and everyone down the hill. If there was someone missing stock, there was no sense in calling the Sheriff. Cally was the one who would know.

I watched the animal for a minute. The window warred with the heat of the wood burning stove

inside and the much- below-zero temperatures outdoors. I stared through the fogged window into the ghostly white gloom, the misty white-on-white that swallows up the landscape. It had been like this for three days, snowing and snowing.

Cally wasn't home or else she was out at the barns. I planned to call later if the calf was still around, but it went away.

Then it was back. While it ambled a little closer up the drive, I tried Cally's number again. She asked me what it looked like. I said it was brown, shaggy brown. Like a winter coat beginning to shed.

She said she'd let me know if she heard from anyone. Pretty soon, I called her back. "Cally, that is a strange looking calf!"

"What's strange?" she asked.

"It has a hump at its neck. It looks a little unbalanced, like its body is too high on its legs. Maybe it's really sick. Should I call the Sheriff?"

"No!" she scoffed. She was always laughing at my city ways. She often told me I was on an awfully long trail to becoming a country girl. "Why do you think it's sick?"

"Just because it looks so strange."

"Where is it now?"

I went back to the window, and the awkward critter was a mere few feet from the house. "Goodness, that is the weirdest calf I ever saw!"

"Describe it to me," she said.

"Well, its head looks too small, and its back isn't broad enough. It has kind of a ridge..."

"That ain't no calf!" I heard her slap her knees, laughing in huge guffaws and trying to explain to her husband.

Back to the phone in a minute, she snorted, "That's a caribou, you Goony. He belongs to the Jensens up the hill. They've got a bunch of them.

Still learning about country life, I guess. And glad to know that poor caribou wasn't one of Santa's arctic unemployed in search of full-time work. Cally just shook her head every time she saw me, all winter long.

Skunk duel...

A sudden whiff made me wonder whether it was a car or one of our dogs that met up with a skunk.

After a while it faded. My olfactory blockers must have kicked in to protect my delicate sniffer. What a blessed relief to our human senses, especially for rural humans. Imagine gagging on vaporized skunk juice outside your door for three days, or even three hours. I wonder if it smells as bad to the dogs or the critters of the fields.

A few minutes later the musky fumes came back full strength. Pheww! Over the next hour, we noticed several waves of the odiferous cloud.

"Honey," I said to MyKeeper, "it seems like it must be parading back and forth past our house - in a bad temper, too."

Our neighbor came over. "Pew-wheee! What did you do to make him mad?" He warned us that skunks look for places to winter over as autumn nights get

cooler, often finding small hidden nooks and crannies in any basement they can squeeze into.

Well, it was autumn. And evening. We lived in a big two story house. The house had a basement, with lots of nooks and crannies, and a huge woodstack to feed the firebeast furnace that kept our house warm in the below zero temperatures of eastern Washington winters.

We also kept our doors and windows open a lot - an invitation to fresh air, not skunks.

"So, you think he might be IN the house?" I asked. I slammed the door to the basement stairs and leaned on it. I just knew that skunk was two-thirds up the stairwell with his tail raised.

How anyone thought to include even a smidgen of that brutish smelly ingredient in fine perfumes, I'd never be able to guess. It apparently enhances the exquisite sweetness. It takes very few parts per million of skunk juice to fill a room or a neighborhood with that stink. Perfumeries must use only a fraction of a molecule in their fragrances. Might have beefraction of a molecule in their fragrances. Might have been where they came up with the idea of splitting atoms. Ya think?

MyKeeper and I stood at the basement door.

I spoke first. "Somebody needs to go down there."

"Is my name 'Somebody' tonight?"

I nodded.

He opened the door an inch and peered into the darkness.

He pulled the string on the stairway light and started down the stairs.

"Wait!" I said. "You can't just go down there. We need to think of a strategy."

We picked out a couple places the skunk might choose to set up winter housekeeping in our basement. We discussed whether MyKeeper should go down the stairs, or sneak in through the back yard door. We determined emergency escape routes in case he met up with the skunk.

Then we started to think about what he'd be faced with if he actually found the skunk.

He needed protection, something to level the playing field. I ran to the bathroom and grabbed a couple things. Just before he pushed open the door, the background music on the radio heightened the drama. The strumming of "Dueling Banjos" trailed behind him as he descended the steep staircase with resolute steps carrying his weapons: a flashlight, a towel to shield him, and a can of hairspray.