

Song of County Roads

By Ginny Greene

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SONG OF COUNTY ROADS

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Table of Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	7
Foreword	8
<i>Music of a long dirt road</i>	10
Catching Chickens...	11
Meeting the neighbors...	14
The goat whisperer...	17
Vacant house on a mountain road	20
Star light...	21
Surprise to me!	23
"P" words...	24
The "mountain" goats...	27
<i>Music of the wild things</i>	31
Wild goose chase...	32
Mid-winter visitor...	35
Skunk duel...	38

How to Catch a Skunk...	.41
Looking up...	.43
Meet me at the cayenne...	.46
Mouse Comedy	.50
<i>Music of the wind</i>	.51
Bag weather...	.52
Silver Breeze	.54
Cold chicken...	.55
Life on the fly...	.58
Wind driven...	.60
Block and Tackle...	.63
Wind Travels...	.66
This Wind	.68
Poem Comes Calling	.69
<i>Music of seasons</i>	.70
Holiday heels...	.71
Pitching woo...	.74
Central heating...	.77
Nostalgia Under Glass	.80
Get well soon...	.81
Red Bird	.83
Photo shoot...	.85
Dog days of winter...	.88
<i>Music of laughter</i>	.91

Dusting with flour...	92
We Ride At Dawn...	95
Peanut's discovery...	98
Triage: a time sort	100
Oh, nuthin' much...	101
Typing lesson...	104
Driving a stick shift...	107
Ginkgo on my mind...	110
Jessica's toothbrush...	114
<i>Music of the fields</i>	117
Taking a break	118
Mowing for money...	119
Crossing the line...	122
Noah's first stop...	126
Ritual	128
Hog sale...	129
Peaceful pastures...	132
Some help...	136
Fencing 'em in...	139
<i>Music of the earth</i>	142
Utter silence...	143
Goat at Giglio's	145
Far From Town	146
The anointing storm...	147

Living on eagle time...	150
Tanking up in Texas...	153
Storm's Coming...	157
Myopic Skyline	158
<i>Music of a country day</i>	159
Peanut butter contest...	160
Diamonds in a Blue Day...	163
Gourmet Dinner for Eight	165
A worm story...	166
Nick of time chicken...	169
Saying "no" ...	172
Washing dishes	175
Boots and belts...	178
<i>Echoes of the song</i>	181
The yellow bowl...	182
Sweet Pea's allowance...	185
Lesson Plan	187
Might have missed...	188
Clabbered milk...	191
Stringing words...	195
Granny's sepia profile...	198
Acknowledgements:	201

Dedication

To Larry, who found the country heart in this city girl. I get a bit squeamish at times, but to this day he utters his refrain, "Yes, it's a dirty world, but hands wash."

Foreword

Enchanting farms hosted my family while we all grew up together. The farms gathered us in and taught us the words and music of their Song. These stories wag back and forth between the first in Eastern Washington, and the next in West Texas.

The Cast of Characters, besides myself, are the grandkids:

Punkin, the oldest,
Sweet Pea,
Peanut,
and their mother, Puddin'
Smiley Riley and his mother, Precious
and MyKeeper (a pretty good guy - I think I'll keep him)

My clan approves their pet names. They get to claim it or blame it, depending on whether they want to be the star of the story or pin it on their sisters.

This doesn't even begin to include all the dogs, the barn cats, my goat buddies, the hawk on the

telephone pole surveying his kingdom for food, or Lydia the Lady Mockingbird who comes by to chat.

Count in all the critters crawling, stinging, burrowing, nesting, cheeping, and buzzing, who also call our plot of ground home. Together, we sing the Song.

*Music of a long
dirt road*

A life-size ceramic cat was once enough, back in the days before the long dirt road. My Keeper relishes the chance to remind me of that when he sees me knee-deep in critters.

Catching Chickens...

A want ad appeared in the local weekly newspaper: "Chickens for sale." MyKeeper and I were decorating our newly purchased farm with critters, with intentions to fill the empty chicken coop with hens bearing brown eggs. I made the phone call next morning. "We have eight," the lady said.

"Only eight?" I pictured a chicken farm sales counter with dozens of chickens to choose from, and people lined up to purchase their choice of breed. "How many do you need?" she asked.

"Just enough to provide eggs for our family breakfasts and a few desserts."

She said eight hens would pretty much keep a family supplied with eggs. Even over the phone it sounded like she rolled her eyes. Next I asked if they laid brown eggs. She said they were New Hampshires. I mumbled, "Oh...good."

Sensing the hesitation, she caught on quickly. "Yes, they lay brown eggs."

"May I ask what time of day chickens lay their eggs?" My question was to gauge whether there would be eggs for tomorrow's breakfast, or would we need to wait till the next day.

"They're not laying yet," she said. "They're pullets."

This time I had to confess the depth of my ignorance. "What are pullets?" I asked, "Do they still lay brown eggs?"

"Pullets are young hens before they start laying."

"Hmmm...not laying yet. I really wanted laying hens."

"These will start laying in two or three months," she said.

When I said maybe I should try to find some that were already mature, she said like as not they would quit laying as soon as I put them in a new home. She told me hens don't like sudden changes. Well, that set me down hard.

"OK," I said, "Can I pick them up in about an hour?"

"Well, yes," she said, "but it might be better to wait till evening. We won't be here, but you can just take them."

"Maybe tomorrow would work better."

"Same situation tomorrow," she said. There was a long perplexed pause (mine), and a quick comprehension (hers).

"It will be easier to catch them in the evening." "I have to catch them?" Her words bashed my mental image of a nice neat counter over which I would purchase chickens packaged to carry home. I guess this is why my neighbor likes to say I'm on a very long trail to becoming a country girl.

The lady on the phone assured me the chickens wouldn't be hard to catch. "They sleep under the dog house. All you need to do is be there as the sun goes down."

While my head spun, she added, "If they slept outside, you could just pick them up, because chickens can't see in the dark. But you'll have to nab them just before they disappear under the dog house."

(Yes. We caught the chickens. This was much too wild a challenge to pass up.)

Meeting the neighbors...

"No, darlings. No-No-No! We can't keep him!"
The girls' hopeful expressions shifted into pouty faces.

We were a new family on a long dirt road in West Texas. We didn't know anyone on our road until the dogs helped us out.

Here's how it happened. A wrinkly black dog trotted by each morning to say hello to our wolfy Maggie and our boxer Gretchen. He never stayed long. He had lots of dogs to greet on his daily morning jog.

Within weeks, his human family acquired a new puppy. The dog didn't change his routine for one minute. He brought puppy along with him. At least as far as our house. And left him here.

His daily route may have been too far for puppy legs, or maybe he thought the little guy would slow him down. It occurred to me that the dog might be jealous of the puppy and wanted him to "get lost."

Or maybe he didn't want any newcomer butting into his life down the road.

All I know is, our dogs were happy to baby-sit. They gathered up the puppy and led it to a safe den. Nothing could have gotten past them. "Aunt Gretchen" and "Aunt Maggie" were guardians, teachers, and nurturers. They made the adoption formal.

We met a few of our near neighbors while trying to find puppy's family.

Meantime, the kids named him Jake. That was enough to spur me to action. I covered our garbage can with butcher paper and shoved it out to the edge of the road. I wrote a note in big, dark letters... "Your lost puppy?" - and drew an arrow towards our house.

Pretty soon, a man came to the door and said it wasn't his puppy, but he might know whose it was. Now we'd made the acquaintance of one more person who lives on our road. And a bit later we met puppy's family. Nice folks. And they were awfully glad to get their new pet back.

Well, the wrinkly dog didn't want to quit his morning routine. And he wasn't into training a puppy. So Jake (his family has a different name for him) ended up at our house again.

Next time was easier, though. I shoved the garbage can out to the road, clothed it in butcher paper, and wrote, "Oh, Sandra..." Several more neighbors stopped by to check on the puppy, and Sandra showed up after work to take Jake home. Our dogs and our kids are still pouting.

The goat whisperer...

From what I've learned about horse whispering, it is patiently devising ways to make the horse do what you want it to do, so that the horse thinks he wants to do it.

Those methods should work for goat handling, too. Right?

In order to make my goats do what I want them to do, I first had to get their attention. The book says grain works. Shake a can with a little grain in it and the goats come running - but not until after they connect the rattling can to tasty treats. This was a hard lesson (for me!) when my new goats escaped to the neighbor's field before we had a chance to get to know each other very well. Goats are the first definition of stubborn. MyKeeper says I'm the second, but I say his dictionary made a mistake.

Texas is the goat capital of the United States. Texans raise meat goats, novelty goats, dairy goats, and fine-haired fiber goats for textiles. Regardless

of breed, they must be herded, fed, sheltered, and nursed. The state's goat owners no doubt possess the largest collective knowledge of goat management, but I learned it all the hard way.

It used to come as a surprise when one of our milkers sent a bucket clattering over the end of the stand, or into my lap. Gradually, I learned to sense the kick coming. I learned to anticipate the trigger before the kick, when the muscles gather for the jerk. Without realizing it, I learned to get inside the goat's head, to be there before she thinks the beastly thought. Goat whispering is a lot more work for me than for the goat.

The does still surprise me at times. They do it by luring me with days of passive sweetness, then overturning the bucket when I least expect it. Anyone who doubts a goat's intent need only notice the impish look in their eyes. I think they are learning more about me than me about them. And it doesn't leave them nearly as exhausted.

Stella is ready to be fed at the stand. She loves to trick me. She plays that docile game to the hilt, then one random day breaks the routine with some capricious twist.

In her caprine silliness tonight, she decides not to put her head in the stanchion. I must thwart the behavior before she "gets my goat." She'll dodge her head to the left and then to the right of the

stanchion. If I miss the cues, her next surprise is to lurch past me and out the gate. The chase is on. All the goats join in. It's fun for them. Not for me.

So, I'm ready for her. Most milkings, it takes only one block to the left and one block to the right when she tries to dodge. She likes to think it's her idea when she finally pokes her head through the stanchion. I pat her and tell her she's a good girl. She munches her grain treat.

This day I'm in a hurry. Stella knows. Somehow she knows. The game goes beyond four dodges to the left and right. She tries to back away. I'm countering her moves. Everything is still calm. Then she ducks her head. Before she can charge past me, I throw my weight against her and whisper directly in her ear, "GET YOUR HEAD IN THE GOL-DANG HOLE!!!"

It worked! Maybe I could write a book. I'd title it *The Goat Whisperer*, or *How to Get Your Goat's Goat!*

*Vacant house on a
mountain road*

Broken window
spider web
bullet hole
sagging roof
one leaning wall
deserted house
except
for the ghosts
the only ones
who knew
the story
no one else knew
until the gunshot

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.

How to Catch a Skunk...

Does a skunk have any natural predators? Anything at all? Buzzards? Not exactly. They are just the cleanup crew. Maybe automobiles. Actually, the Great Horned Owl can drop out of the sky and grab a kit before the mother can activate her spray unit.

Those who watch skunk behavior say that any hunter of mammals will eat a skunk if they are hungry enough. There's the key. Like spiders and scorpions, skunks are so distasteful that no animal wants to include them in their food chain. Humans can detect even a whiff of the smelly sulphur thiols a mile away.

Even my dogs don't do well at chasing away skunks. They learned (the hard way) exactly the distance a skunk can pump its lethal juice. After that disgusting experience they would still rush a skunk, but keep a precise distance, plus one inch. This keeps the skunk in place for a long time, tail lifted and at the ready, but does nothing to rid us of the skunk.

My neighbor says it is easy to catch a skunk. All you need is some skunk junk food (say, a frog or a bee or some berries) and a cage. Next you locate the skunk's address. Online you can

find ANYONE, but not a skunk. Look for a hump, a rounded dome. While you're looking for a little skunk-sized hump, don't be surprised to find one bigger than you imagined. And that is only the back door, the escape hatch. Punkin said the one she found was so big a horse could hide in there. Not comfortably, but...in a pinch.

Continuing, set the cage near the skunk dome. Bait the trap and set the trigger.

Then wait...

Then what? So you catch a skunk and he's madder than hornets. The trapper can't even get close enough to carry it away or shoot it.

"No-no-no," said my neighbor. "The cage should be big enough to enter and small enough to prevent a tail raising."

"So there are custom-fitted skunk traps?"

He ignored that and kept to his story. "Then you take the blanket..."

"What? You catch a skunk with a blanket?"

In all seriousness, my neighbor explained it this way: "You approach slowly, very slowly, the blanket held up in front of you, only your feet and fingertips exposed..."

I don't know. Seems like a sure-fire way to get sprayed. I think I'd watch, first, from a distance. I could donate an old blanket, though. I don't even want it back.

Looking up...

I need to study more about birds. Watching them flood back in spring makes me want to know who they are, where they winter, and how far north they go once they pass over our heads. I don't know what most of them are called, and I feel a certain lack for not knowing.

Spring migrations start with the Canada geese in Washington State. I researched a little about them. Their proper name is Canada, not Canadian Geese, which we all grew up hearing. They are as much a promise of approaching spring as a crocus peeping out of snow.

The Canadas arrive one bleak and chilly day, honking their arrival. I know this doesn't thrill a lot of folks.

Increasing populations are taking over cities and suburbs, and they say Seattle wants to ship theirs east of the Cascades.

Pests or not, there's something noble about them that keeps me from grouping them with starlings or wasps or mice. It's inspiring to think they would deign to come forth into our barren landscape and chase winter away for us.

While we watch, the geese land near the Okanogan River, foraging on our meager back acres even before the grasses start growing. Sometimes it's one pair, sometimes 20 or 50 or 90. They spend all morning feeding.

The geese get lots of exercise when the dogs scare them up. I never know who's in command. The dogs start out ahead by routing the birds from their pleasant feeding. Then the geese wear the dogs to a frazzle, hazing them clear across the field only inches above their heads.

I count it privilege to witness goose parents taking their young on maiden flights. After small take-off trials, with a couple of touch-and-go landings, they fly in widening circles, finally disappearing for hours into the blue beyond.

We stop what we're doing and watch from the first curtain call to the last encore when the honkers lift off and fly overhead. Their flight is just as captivating whether it's a pair brushing the treetops or the shimmering thread of dozens in "V" formation high above.

When they fly low their honking fills the air. Wings wide, their flapping echoes a hundredfold, while their hydraulics squeak a measured pace.

All this beauty does, occasionally, have its hazards.

While moving irrigation pipes out a little further in the field one blistering summer day, MyKeeper and I stopped to watch two geese rise in tandem off the River. I craned my neck, watching them fly directly overhead so close I could have seen their eyelashes if they had any.

It was like sitting in the front row of the ballet, where you can see muscles ripple, hear the dancers breathing hard, and hear the slap of feet on the floor.

It was like that, watching the geese in command performance over our heads, until I saw a wormy squiggle spiraling down toward me, kind of like a cigar. I barely had time to shriek and jump aside. It landed - SPLAT - on my jeans. Whew! It was nearly my forehead!

I wondered if the majestic anserine was capable of such tricks on purpose. I was thinking that perhaps Canada geese did fit into the general category with starlings as I plodded under the hot sun back across the field and up to the house to change my clothes.

Meet me at the Cayenne...

"Not now, Honey, I'm pickling the towels," I hollered back down the hall. Somewhere I had heard that vinegar in the rinse water reduces lint. Our dryer produces at least four pounds of lint each and every wash load. It had to be worth a try.

Calibrating the optimum amount of vinegar per load has been a gradual process. The measure for the last load was a quart and a half. And that was a polyester load. Terry cloth is the acid test. If it doesn't work, I might as well dismiss this wash day hint as myth.

Handy hints and home remedies fascinate me. I read *The Mammoth Hunters* and *Clan of the Cave Bears*, following Ayla all around her ice age world as she learned how to use the tools of nature. Author Jean Auel's research was so painstaking I could have

sworn she was present at the dawn of mankind, watching.

I found another book at the local library, about the favorite home remedies of Texans. I came away with the conviction that early Texans had to have steel-lined stomachs to have survived some of the folk remedy practices of those days.

It did turn out that bath soap breaks down detergent suds and adhesive tape pulls out slivers better than my fingernails. Flour and coffee grounds are said to stop bleeding. In fact, a Native American of my acquaintance once packed the chest of a wounded horse with flour at a rodeo until the veterinarian could get there.

Some say to use superglue on mosquito bites, or a very smelly bear grease to keep the mosquitoes from biting in the first place.

Pinching the web between thumb and first finger as hard as you can is said to alleviate headache. Actually, I remember this worked once when I was just too tired to get up for any "take two pills" remedy.

Hairspray is the ultimate stain remover, and peppermint oil can be sprayed or rubbed on surfaces to keep flies away.

Open the refrigerator door and mash food on your face to tighten, tone, draw out, cool or calm the

skin. Make a mask of apricots, strawberries, grapes, oranges, avocados, cucumbers or egg white. Then make fruit compote and pound cake with the leftovers.

One summer day I heard that ants don't like cayenne pepper. I ran to the cupboard and sprinkled it all over the kitchen; every inlet and ant trail I could find.

They loved it. They are "fire" ants, after all. They called their whole ant town to come and celebrate. They walked through it, jumped in it, rollicked and played all afternoon. Toward evening they were doing the "bunny hop" and then formed a "Conga Line." I put on my Latin dance music CD.

I could just imagine the first ants out of the nest each morning, and all their fellow ants asking, "Where to today?"

"Oh, meet me at the cayenne pepper," would be the reply. "We'll have a feast - cha-cha-cha - it's Festival! Olé!"

Then, the best news! I read somewhere that ants won't cross a chalk line. I tried it on my kitchen counter, and at the kitchen door. It worked so well, I bought six boxes of chalk sticks and drew lines around the whole house. I stood behind the inner line with hands on hips and an "I dare you" look on my face.

I can't decide if the chalk is confounding the ants, but I do see a lot of mashed ants outside. The girls keep hopscotching the gridwork and calling me out to re-chalk the lines.

Mouse Comedy

Mouse traps
set all around
The pests!
The vermin! - Out!
Till the rattling
traced down by sound
and there, in the trap,
Gus-Gus himself
fat and cute
needing only his
striped T-shirt
stretched over
his girth
by Cinderella,
poor thing, dangling
by one finger
swinging from the ceiling
whimpering
We freed him

*Music of the
wind*

Wind teaches me its song
wherever I go, but West Texas
Wind is the eminent professor.

Bag weather...

I stuck my head out the door, squinting to get a clearer look at the white thing fluttering in the distance. A white dog maybe? Or a lamb grazing between the trees? After a few minutes I realized it hadn't moved. Maybe it's a trick of the sun shining all dapply on the bark. A gust of wind grabbed my hair and whipped it back and forth. Before I could pat it down another blast barreled through and fluffed it straight up.

By then I recognized the white thing. It is bag weather today, and that is a plastic bag hung up on a low branch of the tree. Flailing mightily, it worked to free itself from the twigs, but the tree had a stranglehold and would not let go.

Right on the heels of snow melt came this West Texas wind. In a creative fury, the wind decorated the winter countryside not yet dressed up by spring flowers and greens.

She huffed and puffed, grabbing bags, papers and tissues. Careless in her path, she whipped up the dust in a Dervish frenzy, blowing sand across the road.

Paper scraps were tossed up like a handful of glitter against the blue sky. Bags filled with air swooped, emptied in a dive, and just in time were buoyed again by an updraft. They were caught in the claws and teeth of the wind, subjected to the ragged gyrations of a kite, but tied to no string.

Whistling to herself all the while, the wind flung handfuls of pretty baubles everywhere. Rearranged according to whim, some were ripped from trees to adorn a stretch of briars.

Shaping the feather-weight materials at hand, she draped the dreary land with scarves and sashes and lace. She slapped a ribboned strip of plastic onto a shrub for a swishy fringe. Trees and fencelines were fancied with the tatters of colorful bags that became beads and chains, jewels of blue and white and yellow.

Finished, the wind stood back a bit, looked it over and, pleased with her artistry, smiled. The scene was a beauty wrought of wildness.

The wind loves a good bag day. She left sometime in the night, taking her fashion show on to another unsuspecting cold lifeless landscape.

Silver Breeze

Watching that woman
wearing grey
around her temples

Looking back at an empty nest
throwing off shackles and
charging down a new road

Cheers to the woman
roaring past gray
and on beyond purple

Cold chicken...

The little red hen kept to her nest, even as the weather turned suddenly cold. The north wind prowled the land with its lips pursed, howling and hissing, searching out gaps and crevices to whistle through.

The hen sat stoic, refusing to leave her eggs unattended. I carried pails of hot water from the house to break up the frozen water in the trough. All the other hens came running and dipped their beaks into the warm water, tilting their heads up to let the water trickle down their throats. But the little hen wouldn't budge from her nest for any temptation - not her favorite grain or even a sip of warm water.

The kids and I had noticed the Banty coming on broody. For more than a week we had left her eggs in the nest while we gathered the others.

A Banty is the most wonderful little mother. Most of the other breeds and crossbreeds are

refined for production. The broodiness is bred out of them so they'll keep laying. But a Banty hen can barely be prodded off her nest when she decides it's time to set a clutch of eggs. She'll take only tidbits of sustenance, then scuttle back to the nest. Whether she herself is cold or not, the damp body heat beneath her is the exact environment needed for the viability of her eggs.

The shrieking north wind sent a chill down my spine. Blustery blasts pierced the gaps of the Banty's corner nest, ruffling her feathers. The only cackle was the wind laughing at her misery.

In great sympathy, I went round back of the chicken house and patched the holes for her. Spreading flat a large cardboard box for insulation, I quietly tacked it to the back wall and around the corner. It was sufficient to cut off the brutal attack. The wind huffed its disgust and went off to play nasty somewhere else.

My efforts pleased me, and I left the little hen to happily set her eggs till a warmer day when baby chicks would be mature enough to peck their way into the sunlight.

Next morning, though, I found she had abandoned that nest. Several feet along the back wall was a new dent in the hay. She had scratched out another nest, more to her liking, and in it was

one fresh egg. Nothing could entice her to return to the abandoned clutch of eggs.

Blowing meanly across the new nest was a cold shaft of wind. It's tone changed when I came around the corner. I just know it was scolding me.

Many lessons like this have taught me how much learning and serving are cloaked in the words "have dominion." What do I know? I was just trying to help. And what would a creature of absolutely no brain have to teach me?

I didn't know that little Banty hen and the North Wind were in cahoots together. Tough as it may have been for her, she knew a cold draft of moving air is better for her maternity room than a warm but stagnant corner nest.

Life on the fly...

A fly, they say, lives
a day, only one day
Cramming all hopes and
dreams and pain and joy
into time divided
by merely minutes.
How is the value
of a life measured
this way? One buzz, one
eat, one crawl upon
the wall, a frantic
clasp to procreate...
then off to sleep, a
long eternal sleep,
by exasperated
swat or ripe old age.
Did he reach his dreams?
See his grandchildren?
All the richness of
seventy years distilled

to the zany flutter
of diaphanous wings
The fly truly lives
a life on the fly.

Wind driven...

It's like a living thing this morning, the wind. Cold came with it, bullying the heat. In a few short hours the wind subdued temperatures in the mid-90s to a chilly 48 degrees, and left summer whimpering, "Uncle."

So many winds live here in West Texas. They each have distinctive characteristics. A wind that brings cold into battle with hot dry desert winds, and triumphs, should have a name.

Wind names elsewhere are mistral, monsoon and typhoon, sirocco and Santa Ana. Even simoom. There are gales and hurricanes, and breezes like gusty and zephyr. Somewhere in the world is a wind with the beautiful, deceptive name, Mariah.

But that's not enough to classify all the West Texas winds. The North Pole populations list something like 31 names for snow, because they have a lot of snow. Their snows are defined by season, size, texture, moisture. From what I've seen, there

are enough winds in West Texas for at least 31 descriptions.

A rare wind came by the other day. It passes by at least once a summer close to a spot I'm standing.

This wind wears a skin - a strong, tightly knit wind skin to keep it from dissipating into the generic winds. It has a nucleus, a tail, a body that propels it on airborne feet.

This wind needs a name. The name should tell how it barges across the land, a rude interloper, a wind devoid of manners. It is a loud, brash show-off, unmindful of its path, intimidating livestock and shoving trees sideways.

The name must tell of its voice, for a bellowing howl runs with it. It's a voice that sounds like a motor wound up to top speed. It gets your attention.

This wind comes on fast and barrels across our property, racing some unseen timekeeper. One summer, this strange wind charged through a stillness. Other years, it has challenged a wider, bigger wind. Its compact size lets it dodge and ram and punch its way past, the whole time yelling at the top of its raspy bass.

I heard it coming the other day. Its voice swelled to a rage. I stood mesmerized, watching its invisible passing as if it were a train going by. It leaped our boundary trees, cascaded into the field,

rushed headlong across the pasture, leaned up hard against the fenceline. At the break in the roadside trees, it made a wild escape through the driveway. It roared across the road and faded into the neighboring field.

This wind has such a presence. In a way, it is like the water in a stream plummeting down a mountainside, crashing over cliffs, and surging over rocks. A wind like this should have a name.

Block and Tackle...

This is not a football story. Nor is it a story about pulleys and lifting equipment. The block I'm talking about is writer's block. I've got it bad. This could be a very short story. I can't think of a thing to say. And further, I'm nearly convinced at this point that I never will again.

Words are what I love. I love how 26 little letters can be arranged to make thousands of words. The words can be used over and over to put the thoughts from my head onto paper. Paper that can be read by others.

The process of writing whisks me off to another world - somewhere away - so deep, so high, so far away I lose myself in it. Everything is shut out. All the kids' noises, TV noises, the buzz of the clothes dryer, the ding of the microwave that tries to remind me it has heated that same cup of water three times so far today. If I remember to start dinner, it still might end up burned or unfinished.

I've missed appointments and left kids waiting to be picked up.

Sometimes I get hung up on an awkward phrase or paragraph. It's frustrating. I fidget in my chair, casting about in a mental void for the right words or the right way to use them. When I'm worn to the nub and all seems hopeless, I have to tell myself very firmly - There ARE enough words in this language to say what you mean!

I get my second wind, charge forward, tackle the problem paragraph and wrestle it to the floor. I'm left sweating, exhausted, and shaky. It takes a lot out of me, but it is a glorious and victorious feeling when that certain "something" says "That'll work."

But this week there is no story in my head. I'm blocked. Maybe it's the season change, or the pressures of a busy fall schedule, or the weather. Too much gray sky takes the wind out of my sails. Worries multiply like virus and squeeze out creative thoughts.

There are a lot of reasons for writer's block, but reasons don't really matter. All that matters is that I somehow manage to untangle the knots that hold me in this paralysis.

Avoidance is the first thing I always try. It never works, but I still try. I make a phone call, or

fold clothes, crucial tasks like that. I walk out to the mailbox, amble alongside the goats, pick up a book, wash dishes, stare out the window, pick lint off my shirt.

Finally, I have to sit down and put words on paper. Any words. Words call up more words. It makes me understand what W. H. Auden meant when he said, "How do I know what I think, until I see what I say?" I dread those days when I feel like a robin tugging on a worm that does not want to come loose of the earth.

Hey! I just checked the word count for the fifty zillionth time. The computer says it has dutifully preserved 537 of my words. That's enough for a dry spell. I can quit now. I'll be back next story, hopefully blessed with a heap of words.

Wind Travels...

The chameleon wind is on a whirlwind tour.

She might have made it across the countryside unnoticed, except for the dirt road that lay like a ribbon across her path. The sand she snatched from the ditch sketched her swirling profile in the air as she spun to the edge. The dust devil is an impish child of Mother Wind, but she was allowed to indulge her whimsy, twirling an eggbeater path across the field.

She lets loose her breezes to eddy and twist in an upward spiral. The handful of dirt sifts through her fingers, but she juggles it upward again before it can fall back to the earth.

In her swishy dust devil costume, she danced across the field and into a yard. Inches before crashing against the white house next door, she laughed and whirled, cutting a sharp turn to the left. It was then she dropped the sand, and the visible wind disappeared.

The wind child traveled on in secret until she couldn't bear the suspense. Exploding with giggles, she popped into the top of a tree and whipped it frothy. The leaves were still laughing when she touched the branches of the next tree, skipping from one to the next along the row. The sprite ruffled the composure of the stately sentinels that stood windbreak duty along the property line. She thought they took their job much too seriously, and she loved coaxing them to laughter. A merry "tee-hee, tee-hee" followed her frolic to the last treetop.

For a while, again, her wind song was a faint whisper, giving no clue to her next direction. Then, she flashed her gauzy skirts and flung herself at the tree to the east. She shouted in its ear, then ran away, laughing.

It was time to go, but there was one more tree to the north. She couldn't resist. She could never resist a willow. Flopping across its canopy, she tickled it mercilessly, and left it pale and green and gasping for air. It seemed the willow hollered, "Come back, come back, that was fun!"

But Mother Wind grabbed her hand and together they moved on.

This Wind

Who's up there
hurling the wind
above the trees
volley after volley
whistling past - Listen!
another heave-ho,
sounds beastly heavy,
takes a strong arm
to lob it aloft,
Olympics athlete
heaving granite
balls of air.

Poem Comes Calling

So much to do
today
but what can
I do
when a poem leaps
at me
grabs my hand
and pours
words, wonderful velvety words,
slippery-slidey tickly words,
words passionate or humorous,
through the sieve of my mind.
No passing up this visit.
Welcome, Poem!

MUSIC OF
SEASONS

Consider the seasons - of love
and health and life and
celebration

Holiday heels...

"Oh, I wonder how you serve it? Where would you even find it?" I asked the questions after catching the tail end of a Today Show bit with a Southern cook.

"What are you talking about?" MyKeeper asked. "Find what?"

"Whale meat. They said something about eating whale."

MyKeeper cracked up. He laughed and laughed, trying to tell me they were talking about eating WELL.

That's just a sample of how tricky it has been for me to adapt to all things Texas.

Our first days here were filled with utility hook-ups, fast food meals, and getting the girls registered for school. The drawl was pleasant in our ears, but sometimes I just didn't get it.

At school, class requirements and electives were discussed. The required courses were listed on

Punkin's schedule. Everything fit so far. There were no conflicts of time for Math, Science, History, and Language.

The counselor told us Spache was one of the electives. It was available 2nd period, and 6th, but if she chose that elective her math class would have to be moved around. I'd never even heard of a Spache class, so I finally asked, just to clear up my confusion.

"Oh, you know," the advisor said, "Spache. Theater Arts. Drama class."

"Oh. Speech." I felt really silly.

The hardest words in the Texas lexicon are oil and soil. Add boil to that list, too. For the longest time I thought the guy was speaking fondly of his ol' well. And I was likewise puzzled for days when a rancher held up a fistful of dirt and said something was missing from the soul.

The kids tried to coach me on Y'all. They made me practice over and over, and told me I needed to put more energy into the 'ALL' part of it.

By now, we've been in Texas several years. I'm so used to the accent I hardly hear it anymore. I can still be tripped up, though, as I found out the other day. A caller was giving me a name and address over the phone. "It's at Holiday Heels. YourKeeper will know where it is."

"Holiday Heels?" I repeated. I wrote down the number and gave the message to MyKeeper.

"What in the world is this?" he asked.

"Holiday Heels. They said you'd know where it is."

He choked with laughter again. "You mean Holiday Hills!!! It's a church!"

It could have been a shoe store, or a good place to go for a pedicure, or Santa's boot maker. I still picture the congregation kicking it up for the Lord, though. To me it will always be Holiday Heels, a very enthusiastic church.

Pitching woo...

It's about time to rake up all the wasted hay and droppings from the goat pen again. Not an enjoyable chore. I have to talk myself into it.

A couple of days ago, I knew I was nearly ready to get out there. I found myself considering the more pleasurable aspects. When I spend that much time in the goat pen, the herd starts treating me like one of them. They follow me around and rub against me. They look at me with an acceptance that speaks of deep friendship, sometimes cemented by pulling my hair while I'm bent to the task.

Next, I pictured the younger goats walking between my feet and jumping up on me. The bigger ones walk ON my feet, and wedge themselves between me and whatever I'm trying to do. They think they're helping. They have to get their nose into everything. Their nose, and then their whole body.

That thought erased all thoughts of mucking out the pen for another few days.

Days later, an urge came upon me again. I gathered a rake and a wheelbarrow. Then, thank goodness, something happened, and I had to put it off till the next opportunity. Maybe the dog dish was empty, or the kitchen trash can was full. I don't remember the cause of that postponement.

A brilliant thought came to me one cool, cloudy morning. What I really need is chickens. Enough chickens to do the job for me. But then I'd have to clean out the chicken house, too. Ugh! By the end of the day, I'd given up on that idea, and the next day was way too hot for such labor.

Yesterday, I looked for the pitchfork. I found it, but it was a fork with no pitch. The handle was lying broken and useless not far from the rusted fork.

I mentioned to MyKeeper that we needed a new handle for our pitchfork. He said it would be no more expensive to buy a whole new pitchfork than to buy a handle for a broken one.

I explained I've had these urgings to get the job done. I want to get the leavings spread onto the garden before tilling. Of course, if we don't get rain, there will likely be no garden this year, but if we get soaked I want to be ready with seeds. Even if

there's no gardening this year, the goat pen still needs its periodic cleanup.

"Hey, that's great!" he said "I've been wondering what to get you for Valentine's Day. That's just perfect!"

This is the same guy who has such tender thoughts about engagements. We were discussing a friend's search for a ring for his fiancé. The ring chosen was a hardship to the budget, and MyKeeper said, "Why do people buy engagement rings anyway? Diamonds are so expensive." I replied that it was a symbol of belonging to each other. He said, "So's a brand on the haunches. Cheaper, too."

MyKeeper was pleased with himself over the Valentine gift idea. "And everybody says I'm not a romantic," he bragged. "Don't you think that's pretty thoughtful of me?"

"Oh, you're all right!" I said, giving him a pal slap on the back.

What a guy. At least I'll be able to get the goat pen cleaned out before Spring.

Central heating...

"That one won't fit," I counseled from over MyKeeper's shoulder.

He hunched over the small wood stove, stuffing a chunk of firewood into its glowing red interior. A challenge gleam lit his eyes, and I know this won't be over till it's over. All I was trying to do was offer some helpful advice from my experience.

Central heating usually conjures the touch of a finger to a thermostat mounted conveniently on the wall.

Our central heating was a heater stove in the center of the living room.

We have spent a few years wrestling wood heater stoves. Nostalgia forgets the daily ups and down, and only skims across the peaks. Even so, we still like wood stoves. You can melt things or thaw things on them, warm a fragrant potpourri, or dry clothes on them. You can back up to them when you're cold.

But, wood fires take up a lot of time. They smoke up the room, blacken the ceiling, sometimes won't light, and frequently don't stay lit.

Their warmth doesn't reach the frosty back rooms until the unregulated heat gets too hot. Then all the doors and windows get thrown open, even if it's 20 degrees below. It's a lot of work cleaning out the ashes, too, and if we leave for the weekend, the fire goes out and the indoor plants die.

The first person up in the morning has to brave the cold until the firewood catches and takes the chill off. They say chopping wood warms you twice - once when you chop it, again when you burn it. Getting a fire started in the morning can warm you, too, and so can the fuming and sizzling of frustration.

I always got a lot of exercise filling the bin by the stove from the stack by the front door that came from the diminishing cord under cover in the shed.

Back to the living room. MyKeeper has me holding the front door open wide while he tosses an already ignited, too- long log outside. I did warn him, didn't I?

It isn't a log, really. We were used to hefting substantial logs into a massive basement firebeast. This stove is delicate by comparison. It is a black

cast iron stove with a tall smoke stack; more artistic, less functional. It only accepts wood a maximum of 16" long. That's 16" flat across, with no angled slants that would make one edge 16-1/4" long, and no appendage limbs to get hung up on the narrow door.

Tonight it happened again. "I don't think it's going to fit," I mumbled, sizing up the log with a practiced eye. I, too, have had to wrest a smoldering log back out of the stove and toss it out the door. It makes you cautious.

But there's that gleam in his eye again. My comment must have taunted, "You can't do it, Na-na-na-na-Naaa-na." A few grumbles later MyKeeper stood back, satisfied, and brushed off his hands. "There, see!"

He did cram it in there. 'Course, the little cast iron stove looks like it has elbows sticking out the sides.

Nostalgia Under Glass

Autumn cast her backward glance,
flaming tresses flying
in the wind
Looking back behind to find me,
reaching for my fingers
in the wind
Feather light, she races off,
toting all my dreams lived
in the wind
Remembering, I smile and hear
crinkly leaves and echoes
in the wind

Get well soon...

Hi. Yjos osm't Gommu = tjos os <uLee[er/ — oops, what I am tryng to say is: This isn't Ginny. It's MyKeeper. I mean HerKeeper. She's sick this week. She sat here in front of the computer screen looking kind of green. Yuk!Yuk! that's a joke. Green.

I thot it over: shes' not riting, she's not fixing my dinner. I want my dinner more. So I told her, go to bed for awhile. I'll do your colum for you this week. She said I was awful sweet. Awful is about rite, she doesn't know I'm doing it to get my dinner.

My fingers got mixxed up on that first line. you know how if you get your fngers moved over one key the whole centense, er - sentence comes out rong. Rong? No, I think its' wrong.

Scuse me a minit - I gotta go find out where the apostrophy goes in the word "its".

I'm back. She said it depends. She'd haf to know how I used it. But since she doesn't care, she said

put it anywhere. Maybe I'll put it here - it's, or its', or its, take yore pick.

I'll be right bak. I don't know if I need all those commas.

She sed this: A very smart lady by the name of Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart said (right here Im sposed to use quotation marks - she said be sure you do!) enyway, the lady was a writer and she said" ,The older I grow the less important the comma becomes. Let the reader catch his own breath". I guess that's how she feels right now, cuz she's sounding kinda wheezy.

I wonder if its sposed to be a comma or a semicolon in that sentence. And how do I make the whole page double spaced?

To tell the truth, I'm not much of a wordy person. Less is better, or it just gets all complicated. So, I think I'm done. Just a minit. I want her to read it to make sure its allrite. She said coud I please - I mean COULD I please turn off the light, uts hurting - er,,, its hurting her eyes.

Shge's laughing! I think she like's it, maybe shes'feelig better!!! I hope sew. I sure don't want to have to do this again next week.

Till next time, its HerKeeper sigh-ning off and wishing you well.

Red Bird

by your color
or by your call
I find you
bright
glorious
red
or
hearing your
staccato rant
search branches
finally
spied
see
you
where you sit
crested and claret
claiming your
place
little
Red
Bird

Photo shoot...

MyKeeper and I grouped around the kitchen table to look at the snapshots just developed. The photos were taken during our family Christmas holiday in Kentucky, and most of them were of five-year-old Riley. We couldn't wait to see the color prints of that cute little bundle of energy, my grandson and my youngest daughter's boy.

We planned to pick out a couple of the best and send them off to friends and family that don't get to see Riley very often.

We especially wanted to see the series of pictures I took of Riley playing in the snow. I'd hoped to frame that rosy face smiling out of his bright snowsuit, radiant in the contrast of blue sky and a sunlit snowfield.

Riley was so eager to get out in the snow. Bundling up was a long process because he kept running to the window to see if the snow was still there, and to find out who was out in it already. He

wore an excited smile and happy eyes, and was much too impatient to take seriously the reminder that the thumb goes in the thumbhole of a mitten. He wanted to touch snow, catch it on his tongue, blink it out of his eyes. It was exactly that rapturous face I hope to capture with my lens once outdoors.

Outside at last, I snapped a picture of Riley brushing snow off Mama's car. Then I got a shot of Riley hunkered down, rolling a snowball. Next he was off sliding on slick ice. That quickly gave way to stomping on it. Then I was jumping back from the muddy splash that made him laugh and laugh. My shutter missed that laugh.

Back to the snowball. It was on its way to becoming a snowman, but Riley hurled it like a bowling ball into the ravine, instead. I wiped off the lens and missed capturing the devilish giggle on film.

I got a picture of Riley making snow angels and running in the snow and sitting in the snow, kicking his feet in the air.

All the time, he was laughing and laughing.

When I opened the envelope and spread the pictures out for MyKeeper, here's what is actually preserved for all posterity:

Riley's hand as he raced off around the other side of the car.

The toe of Riley's boot as it left the smashed ice.

Three shots of Riley jumping up from making a snow angel - one where he's pointing back at it.

I did remember calling after him, "Wait, Riley, wait," - and "Could you do that for me again?"

Riley moved faster than the camera's eye could blink, and much faster than me. All I caught was him rushing off to the next ecstatic moment. Next time, I'll have to start training ahead of time. I'll need to get myself up to speed if I'm going to catch anything other than the backside of a kindergartener chasing an adventure.

Dog days of winter...

It is so hot today, I need a cold story. Something to make me think of shivers and icicles. I sit myself in a chair, sweat trickling off my forehead and into my eyes (I hate that). I breathe deep and exhale slowly. Twice. Snow is what I want to see behind my closed eyes. I try to picture the drifted snow I trudged through with buckets of hot water for my goats.

Too much work. Works up a sweat. Next I thought and gritted my teeth and thought some more until I pictured myself looking up into a thick grayish blanket of snow falling straight down. I felt snowflakes on my nose and eyelashes. No. It's just sweat.

The blistering heat of this time of year creates in me a desperate need to feel cold. Probably my traitorous Northwest blood waiting eagerly for the first hint of fall.

I try again. Moving my chair over a vent, I breathe in the refrigerated air. Ahh, I feel a thought nudging its way through. It's a cool thought. I see Duchess, my hotdog doggie. She's sitting beside MyKeeper, warmed on a cold winter evening by his body heat and their closeness to the fireplace. Arghh! Too hot!

Two more slow, deep breaths. It's Duchess again. This wiener dog was so aptly named. Until Duchess, I didn't know dogs were supposed to get up on the furniture. She taught methey most assuredly do. Dachshund Duchess was a patient and persistent trainer.

This night is a cold, cold night. One that no one would want to be anywhere but tucked under mounds of blankets. I woke up chilled to the bone. Something was not right. I figured it out. There was no Duchess plumped in a blanket and lodged in the crook of my leg so I couldn't move.

I sat up, shivered mightily, and reached around in the dark to find her. I called to her in loud whispers, but no Duchess.

Alarm woke me thoroughly. I got up. Brrr. Cold tootsies. Where are those fuzzy slippers? (Oh, this is feeling so good back here in the real world on this hot day). I put on my thick terrycloth robe, still shivering. (I love this part. I'm still sitting in this

chair, hanging over a cold air vent, still sweating, but enjoying it more.)

Fumbling my way to the living room, I turn on a light. I can see my breath in frosty clouds. Duchess is not on the big chair, not on the couch, and she's not huddled up to the warm bricks around the heater stove.

It strikes me with a sudden pang. We must have left the poor little thing outside when we retired for the night. I picture her frozen on the doorstep. She's not there, but a blast of cold charges into the living room and swirls into the bedroom. MyKeeper hollers, "What are you doing? Shut the door!" I'm calling for Duchess, calling and calling, but, no answer.

MyKeeper tugs at the blankets. He wants them up over his shoulders, but they won't budge. He yanks at them. "What the...!" he mumbles. He turns on the light. The top blanket is on the floor at the foot of the bed. He plops it onto the bed. It is rolled up tight as a jelly roll. He unrolls the blanket. At its center, not wanting to move a muscle, blinking her eyes and shivering, is Duchess!

Ah, the mere memory cools my fevered brow.

*Music of
laughter*

Nothing more joyous or medicinal than laughter. No laughter better than the laughter of children. Nothing more satisfying than to overhear children laughing.

Dusting with flour...

I walked into the kitchen as Sweet Pea dusted herself with flour. Cheeks. Shirt. Hair. And an extra dab on the nose. Then she slapped her hands together and flour dust powdered the air, settling on the table, the chair, the floor, and the dog.

I spoke to the white-daubed child. She answered, acting as if everyone walks around with flour on their nose.

It's a ritual. She and Peanut were getting ready to make cookies. And it's all Mrs. Barstad's fault. I wrote a feature story about her when we lived on the west coast. She was originally from Minnesota and frequently made potato lefse for her family and friends.

She told me the story would best be told by demonstration, so she invited me to her kitchen.

The whole house smelled warm and fragrant as she greeted me with smiling eyes, wearing a bright blue sweatshirt painted with chickadees in the snow.

They are esteemed in Minnesota, she says, because they sing to you on shivery winter mornings.

Mrs. Barstad loved chickadees, and was proud of her sweatshirt. She said it reminded her of home. She loved making lefse, too, and watching her guests enjoy it.

She ushered me into the kitchen where a pot of tea brewed under a knitted tea cozy. The teapot was from Sweden, a treasure from her mother and the Old Country. We ate home-made sugar cookies and drank tea while we talked about her family in Minnesota and her years of Scandinavian cooking.

After a bit, she went to the counter where potatoes were already cooked and mashed. All the ingredients were laid out, and I thought how organized she was. Half done already. This would be a snap.

Wrong. Preparing potato lefse is for people who have time to cook.

So Mrs. Barstad began. "Step One," she said. "First, you throw a little flour around." She dipped her hands into the flour bin, slapped some on her sweatshirt, patted her hair, and dabbed her cheeks. We laughed. She said there's a reason for this. "Once you've tossed some flour around, you don't mind the mess. And making lefse is messy!"

When finished, we cleaned up and enjoyed the lefse of our labors. I took a picture of Mrs. Barstad Opecialty. She looked like she was having a great deal of fun. Her eyes glowed, her cheeks were rosy, her hair and shirt were still white with flour.

So, when I taught Peanut how to bake cookies one day, Sweet Pea poked her head around the corner and told me I forgot the most important thing about cookie baking.

She took over. "First," she said, "you throw a little flour around..." The air was thick with the ritual of two little cooks in my kitchen, and laughter.

We Ride At Dawn...

When I was a girl in the Northwest, I read about ranch life and pioneer settling and especially about horses. Eventually, TV came. The first ones were little screens in big boxes. They arrived first in our neighborhood, then in our house (probably to lure us back home from the neighbor's television). Programming included many Westerns. I liked that.

Invariably, a particular line was boiler-plate stamped into each book, movie, and TV series:

"We ride at dawn!"

Another repetitive theme was a standard skit in Westerns: The bad guy or a funny guy always ended up in the middle of the desert without canteen, without boots, and wearing only long-johns. What a hoot! Miles from town, limping and groaning and thirsting.

Living in the city, insulated from farm, ranch and desert realities, no whiff of hot dry air came through the TV or movie screen, or the pages of any

book. I knew nothing of the venomous creatures crawling the sands, had no frame of reference to envision miles of land with no trees for shade, and had never sweated a desert sweat.

Now that I have lived several more decades of life, much of it in the deserts of the South, a new perspective pervades my thoughts. You could say I've learned a thing or two.

One thing gained is a great sympathy for those long-johned barefoot cowboys I laughed at in my youth. And more than a little shame for my enjoyment of their misery. Sitting in our family living room in the Northwest, how could I have known of all the burrs and stickers that populate desert soils? Nothing else will condescend to grow there, so sharp things volunteer. Like cactus and prickly pear, and grass burrs, which are not grassy at all, but barbed. They really know how to hurt soft-skinned mammals, two-footed or four.

I'm always grateful for boots and brogans, and at the very least, sandals or flip-flops, letting them take up the heat of the burning hot sand. And it is by far easier to pry grass burrs out of flip-flops than feet.

And then there's still that favorite line that fades off into the West in a flaming sunset -

"We ride at dawn..."

In all those books, all those long-ago TV Westerns, I'd pictured ranchers lighting a kerosene lamp at three o'clock in the morning. (I also wondered what they used for an alarm clock. Probably their most reliable rooster.)

Yes, 3:00 a.m. - in the morning! It had to be. In the Northwest, and in my experience, summertime dawns arrive shortly after that. I didn't see how humans could possibly keep up a schedule like that, day after day, especially if the story involved children, and especially if that child was close to my age. They were always lighting fires in fireplaces before dawn, doing barn chores before dawn, hitching up the wagon before dawn, starting out on the trail before dawn.

Now I know. From a vantage point in Texas, it is clear to me that the sun sleeps in a little, down this way. It gets up and winds the gears of morning at a much more reasonable hour. So, like today, if someone were to say to me, "We ride at dawn," I'd say, "Okay, fine, see you then!" Because I know that tomorrow's sunrise isn't scheduled until about 7:30 a.m. And that's doable. Easy.

Peanut's discovery...

"Over here, Peanut. Put the grain in this bucket while I get the milking pail." I was in such a hurry I threw directions every which way.

I had a meeting to get to, so chores had to tick like clockwork or I'd never make it in time. Dinner was in the crockpot, the critters had to be fed, and I still had to change my clothes.

We kept moving. "I'll get the hay, Peanut. You feed the bunny. Don't forget to pick him some johnson grass or he'll never forgive you."

A few minutes later I handed her the bucket. "Take this milk into the house. I'll put Reva back in her pen and be right in to strain and chill the milk."

"Grandma..."

"Hurry! I have to leave in 20 short minutes!"

"But, Grandma..."

"Scoot! Go! And don't forget water for Pansy."

"Grandma, it's warm."

I was halfway to the barn, and only half listening.

"Gramma. Gramma. It's warm. The milk is warm!"

"What?"

"The milk is real warm when it comes out of the goat."

The light of discovery glistened in her eyes, and it stopped me in my tracks. I hugged her, and remembered back to before her Mama was born.

Puddin' was my first born and, oh, the plans I had for her little life. I saw myself with the patience of Job, introducing her to the wonders of our planet. I pictured her held safely in my arms while she reached for a delicate blossom above her head and I taught her to say "flower."

But, what happened? Instead, it went more like this: "Don't touch that - get down from there - time for your nap - eat your peas - don't forget to brush your teeth - make your bed - do your homework - be home by 10 - no more TV tonight - be home by midnight - yes, here's the keys, be careful..."

Now I'm a grandmother, still pushing to meet schedules. But Peanut just discovered one of the secrets of life. Stop the clock. This could take awhile.

Triage: a time sort

Emergency! Emergency!
Schedule's gone awry.
Re-sort! Milk the goat.
Trash can to the roadside.
Change gears, change clothes,
get to the meeting, late.

Hurry, Jessie, Hold this bucket!
Gramma...
No time, sweetie.
Gramma, Gramma, but...
What?
Milk is warm
fresh from the goat.

Re-sort. Level 1:
a child's discovery.

Oh, nuthin' much...

"Hi, Bunny. What'cha doin'?" Smiley Riley was on the other end of the phone.

"Nuthin' much." I replied. "Let's talk awhile."

My four-year-old grandson in Washington State learned something new. It's called "Leave a Message." If I'm not home, he asks Bompia to "leave a message to have Bunny call me."

"Are you still in Texas?" he asked. He always asks. Maybe to be sure. Maybe to practice the word Texas.

"Yes," I tell him. "It's a hot day and it's lunch time." It's raining there, where he is, and he just got through eating breakfast. He thinks it's silly that I had spaghetti for breakfast. He eats cereal, or toaster tarts. He named all his favorite flavors.

"Mama's sick," he said. Worry painted concern in his voice. He said, "I keep giving her back rubs, but it's still so not working."

I wished I could hug him. "I think every time you rub her back she gets a little bit better."

For a diversion, I told him about the army worm invasion a wet spring brought us. "There are millions of them," I said, "everywhere you step." I told him what color they were, and how they hid in the grass, and ate all my irises.

A long pause clued me he was thinking they wore Army camouflage uniforms and marched in platoons. He finally asked if they knew how to get up the steps and into the house. I told him no, and army worms don't carry rifles, either. He said, "Oh." And then he said, "Good."

Smiley Riley asked me if they looked like caterpillars, and if they had any fuzzies on them. He said he liked caterpillars. Then one of the goats bleated. "Bunny, are you outside? I heard a goat."

"Yes," I told him. "I'm sitting on a stool in the yard, watching Bompa fix the brakes on the pickup."

Then I had more than army worms to talk about. A giant green worm crawled towards my feet. I told Smiley Riley all about its bright color and its darker green stripes.

"How big is it?" he asked.

I told him to look at his hand, and that it was as long as his hand from fingertips to wrist. "Bompa says it's a tomato worm."

"Can it climb stairs?" he asked.

"He's leaving, Riley Boy. I don't have any tomatoes in my garden. Bompas says it's crawling off to check the neighbor's garden.

"Oh," he said, and then - "good."

After the excitement of the gorgeous green tomato worm, all that was left in the dirt at my feet was a squished worm, one of those army worms. Though no creature is much interested in army worms for dinner, one fly liked the idea of dried guts. But so did a fire ant. I watched the food chain fight for awhile, describing it to Smiley Riley on the telephone. He laughed each time the tiny ant nipped the big fly in the fanny.

Pretty soon I said, "Gotta go, Little One. I love you bunches."

He asked, "What'cha gonna do, Bunny?"

"Nuthin' much. Think I'll spend the afternoon thinking about you."

"Silly Bunny," he laughed. "Bye, Bunny. Can I leave a message?" He chanted robotic words into the phone. "This message is for Bunny. Call me tomorrow."

Typing lesson...

Sweet Pea is sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over a typewriter. It's an old, ancient impact typewriter, found at a moving sale. I think it lacked but three to four days to qualify as an antique.

I'm in the next room listening to the catchy rhythm of the typewriter keys. Most kids Sweet Pea's age have never even seen a typewriter close up, much less one this old. She thinks it's really neat.

First thing, I had to tell her a typewriter needs paper. It isn't good to type directly on the platen. She wanted to know more about the parts that moved and the parts that make letters when a key is punched.

Next, I complimented her erect posture and the proper curve of her beautiful piano player fingers over the keys.

She pounds the keys steadily, not looking at the keyboard. She must be doing really well in her

Computer keyboarding class at school, I thought. She'll be typing the Great American Novel before long.

Watching her and listening to the clack-clack-clack of the keys took me back 100 years to high school typing class. I recalled the drills and exercises and the frequent timed tests that strengthened weak fingers and committed the alphabet to muscle memory.

I visualized the roomful of students at rows of typewriters that only the timer bell could quell. Imagine teaching several classes a day immured in all that clatter. I don't think I ever had enough sympathy for that teacher.

Sweet Pea asked for a sentence to type. I gave her some standards: "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country," and "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs."

While I stirred lunch, she kept typing, and my mind wandered back to typing class, and another class called Office Machines. There we met dittoes and stencils, cash register sized 10-key, and clunky rotary calculators. This was just before the world shifted into overdrive. From then on, computer language ruled. I never saw any of those machines again after my first office job.

Sweet Pea is still typing while I dish up lunch. "Oh, cool!" she said. "I just typed 'or.'"

It startled me. "Does that mean you aren't typing words except by accident?"

"Yep," she said, still typing. "Oh, wow! I almost got 'also!'"

I guess it will be awhile before she starts that novel.

Driving a stick shift...

One day MyKeeper pointed out the window. "Look," he said.

I followed his finger until I saw...Oh, my gosh! It was Punkin! Driving! In the fields! Alone!!!

I clutched at my heart, gripped a chair, and forced myself to breathe.

It was really nothing to worry about, though. Kids who grow up on county roads grow up driving - tractors, mowers, old farm pickups and the like. Punkin did the same, beginning on her Grampa's knee.

These days, we call in the dogs and her sisters and all visiting friends, and give the outdoors over to her. She smiles and smiles, bumping and bobbing around the field.

We had to drag her out of the sand pit once when she cut too close. Her aunt before her had to be hauled out of the snow, and once got the old pickup hung up on the humps of a plowed field. Oh, what a mess that was!

One of Punkin's favorite Sunday afternoon events was to forge roadways and driveways for us. Back and forth, back and forth, flattening all the grass and tall weeds in the path. A friend teased her recently about driving in the fields. "I'll bet you even drive back and forth in the driveway!"

She ducked her head and looked sheepish. "Well...um...as a matter of fact..." She laughed.

There were other jobs for her. Useful tasks. Quick as lightning, she'd slide behind the wheel just to jockey the car close to the outdoor faucet so it could be washed. Preferably by someone else. Unless there was spending money involved.

And heavy transport. One of the projects dubbed "Gramma's family outings" was a day of loading the pickup with rocks from the rock pile out back and hauling them to the garden site to be laid out in patterns. Guess who drove the pickup back and forth.

Most of all, she likes to start the car, back it up, and turn the car around in the driveway when we're ready to head to town.

It takes longer than usual, because first she takes a turn around the field, practices backing ten times, makes a few attempts at parallel parking, then drives way out back, out where she can't hear me holler hurry up.

She sights along trees for lanes, and pretends certain weeds are orange road cones. She slaloms between the "cones" of her obstacle course, ending up twenty minutes later curbside to pick me up. I don't even have to step off the porch. She reminds me to buckle up, drives to the road, and puts the car in "park." We then run around the car, changing seats.

I tell her I can't wait till she gets her license so she can cart me around and I won't have to drive. No matter that I know she'll be too busy for an old lady.

Gramps is responsible for teaching, or rather, letting her learn to drive. She loved to hear him start up a vehicle. Any vehicle. Farm or road. He'd wear a secret grin and she'd break out in a big smile. Of course she always assumed he did it for her sake, and not because of any need to get anything done.

A few days ago he drove up in a different pickup. She begged to back it up. He asked for the puppy dog eyes - the supreme plea. She complied. He teased. "No, you can do better than that."

She won out. The puppy dog eyes always win out. He dangled the keys in front of her. He asked, "You sure you can drive a stick?"

A perplexed look flitted across her face, but she hesitated only the short side of a half second before replying, "Sure! A little bit at a time!"

Ginkgo on my mind...

"Honey, that dripping faucet is about to drive me bonkers!" After a month's regimen of Ginkgo Biloba, it took me only four days to remember to tell MyKeeper about the crazy-making annoyance. It might have taken weeks. The pills must be working.

The drip had gone on long enough to be reclassified a drizzle, and once it became a drizzle it penetrated my awareness to the point of exasperation. I heard it over kitchen noises, over the blaring TV, and it woke me in the middle of the night when I thought I was sitting on a rock at the edge of a whitewater river. I tried to get the dream back, but reality kept its sharp edge. I counted dribbles instead of sheep.

Ginkgo came into my life one day as my sister and I were sitting on the sidelines, watching skaters on the outdoor rink at Sun Valley. It was a gorgeous, flower-scented summer morning - the second or third day of my vacation time with her. One of us

mentioned the movie filmed years ago on the 7,000 foot ski slopes of Mount Baldy.

"Who starred in that movie?" I asked.

My sister remembered. I did not. I think it's because she spends a lot of time in that area and is much more familiar with the local history, but she thinks it's because I need Ginkgo Biloba.

Sure enough, a stack of things remembered started piling up. With my mind so full, the pills got forgotten. What a paradox: the pills made me remember things, but remembering so many things made me forget to take the pills.

It will take awhile to see if there's really any positive result, or if I have only found one more thing to forget first thing each morning.

Assessing the value is a little difficult. All in one day, I forgot my grocery list, forgot a friend's name, forgot to take a sack of clothes to the mission on Tuesday. I remembered on Wednesday. They aren't open on Wednesday. Maybe these are slow-acting pills.

One day last week, I managed to recall at 5:20 p.m. what it was I thought in the morning sounded good for dinner. It took a great deal of concentration, but with effort the menu popped out just long enough for me to get to the refrigerator and pull out the ingredients.

Two days ago, I remembered all but one of the four things I wanted to tell my sister next time she called. When the one thing strolled across my mind, I called her back. We talked for another 45 minutes. So, I forgot to do whatever it was I had planned to do that morning.

Huddled somewhere in my memory is the reminder to pick up my coat at the cleaners next week, but who knows if I'll remember by then. My biggest hope is that I remember to check the calendar where I posted the tickler note. String tied in a neat bow on my finger is cute, but absolutely useless in jogging this memory.

Yesterday, the pills helped me remember in the nick of time that I was supposed to get some things to Sweet Pea by noon, before the team departed for the Regional Cross Country meet. I made it with 15 minutes to spare. But, I forgot to iron a shirt for MyKeeper to wear out to dinner that evening.

So far, it's pretty hard to tell if any good is coming from downing those pills every day.

Last night, a huge dam burst its flooding waters in the bathroom. I jumped out of bed and pushed the door open. It was just that dang faucet!

You know, it occurs to me that the memory pills are working. My hearing is greatly improved. Must be the pills got a little confused and missed my

memory centers altogether. I guess good hearing is important, too. Wonder if this means I could take ear drops for better memory.

Jessica's toothbrush...

Jessica and our youngest daughter, Precious, were friends. Friends may not be a strong enough word. They were zipped at the hip from the moment they met in middle school.

They went everywhere together, arm in arm, side by side. Jessica spent so much time at our house we counted her as one of ours.

Their early teen friendship was a collage of eating, phone calls, reading, giggling, homework and phone calls, sleeping over, baking cookies, and more phone calls.

They'd flop on the living room floor with their heads on teddy bear pillows to watch TV and talk. After dinner, they went out back to feed lettuce to Hurkey Turtle. He lived under a big rock under a palo verde tree shading our southwest home. The two worked as a team to get out of doing dishes.

They'd fly out the door in tandem to catch the school bus, go for a walk around the neighborhood,

hike in the surrounding desert hills, or get on the bus to the mall.

To them, shopping at the mall meant cruising from one end to the other, looking for their friends. It meant searching the game center, the theater lounge, or that ice cream place where they all eventually gathered.

A lot of their time was spent practicing leaps and spins at the center of the mall ice skating rink, with visions of Olympics dancing through their heads. Worn out, they would sprawl in a circle with a bunch of their friends for a chat.

Soon as that was done, they'd fling their iceskates over their shoulders and run upstairs to say Hi to everyone they knew at the food circus on the mezzanine that overlooked the rink.

Wherever we drove, the pair would be ensconced in the back seat in luxurious comfort. Blankets, pillows, books, games, ear-plug radios, and food, were packed along to make their journeys pleasant. It didn't matter if we were headed to the grocery store or San Diego.

Driving anywhere with two eighth graders was an experience. Giggles accented their harmonious lament: "Are we there yet? How long? I'm hungry." They rehearsed endlessly.

There is a mental photograph in my mind. Precious and Jessica spent hours hanging on the telephone together. (The telephone played a big role in their young lives). They had their own brand of conference call. They sat, heads together, so they could both hear. They usually combined it with filing their nails, changing nail polish colors, experimenting with powder and eye shadow, or combing their bangs into a gravity-defying fluff, sprayed stiff.

Then Jessica moved. We moved away a short time later, and moved again at the end of a year. Unpacking, I always found Jessica's toothbrush in our toothbrush holder.

Each time, Precious insisted, "No, you can't throw it away!"

We had lost Jessica, and could only hope to run across her again some day. Her orange toothbrush was always ready for her to step through the door as if she'd never been gone.

We moved once again and, too soon, Precious grew up and moved away. Precious took her toothbrush with her.

We still have Jessica's toothbrush.

*Music of the
fields*

Fields of clover, fields of wheat,
fields of daffodils and daisies -
fields draw you out to
contemplate the big picture

Taking a break

Throw down the pencil
Lean back in the chair
Stre-e-e-t-ch
My eyes escape out the window
lured by a West Texas landscape
Fields entice the mind to follow footless
Off I wander
to ponder
and dream

Mowing for money...

Sweet Pea and Peanut are working their way to summer camp.

The two of them help me in the kitchen and in the office. The car is sparkling clean, the yard is picked up, and they've even done a little gardening.

Using teamwork, they dug the grass out of the place by the east wall where I want to put some pastel red flowers.

They're not really pastel red. It's just that my sisters, preferring pastel blends and monochromatic color schemes, tease me endlessly about my passion for splashes of brilliant color.

Together, the girls shined the pickup's dashboard, then went on to sweep and vacuum floors. They've affixed labels to file folders, made photocopies, collated the sets, and argued over who gets to send a fax. We've had newsletter mailing parties in our household since before the girls were

born, so they've grown up learning the assembly line processing of a mailout.

The goats have been fed pretty well since Peanut and Sweet Pea found they could get paid to pick armloads of good weeds and grasses for them. The goats coerce them into hauling oak branches and pecan leaves to the pen. The girls have learned a lot about goat appetites that way.

They're pretty creative when it comes to negotiating chores. They decided if they both push the garbage can out to the road the task gets marked on both their lists.

While cleaning up the yard, Sweet Pea came to me with a deal. "I figure I've picked up \$2 worth of trash. If I pick up five more things, how much more will you pay me?"

I told her it sounded like a math story problem, and if the two trains didn't collide I'd pay her another dollar. She looked at me funny. They must not do story problems in school like we used to.

Even with cash rewards, there's much groaning over the work. They perked up, though, when MyKeeper finally got the ancient riding lawn mower running again. Impatiently taking turns, they drove around the yard, then scooted out to the field in back, ready to race turtles.

They rode the old mower up and down rows, yelling Yee- HAW! Giddy-up! Ride 'em cowboy!

They drew a maze in the tall grass, and took turns finding their way out.

They pretended they wore leathers, and chased each other down, revving the handlebars like a motorcycle.

It was pretty funny watching them try to do an ice skater's skid stop that throws up ice - at the scootering speed of two miles per hour.

I came around the corner of the house just as Peanut whipped around a curve like she was screaming down the steepest roller coaster drop. Next thing I knew she was standing up, arms raised over her head and laughing. She didn't see me until I hollered the amusement park was closed - get off that thing, NOW!

"But, Gramma," she wailed, "we have to finish, or no money, and no camp."

"I don't know, girls. I'd have a hard time paying you for having so much fun."

Turns out, mowing the lawn is serious work after all. Very serious work.

Crossing the line...

There was a time we had trouble keeping the goats in their pasture. Putting up an electric fence didn't help, in fact it only made it more complicated.

Now that is all undone. Things change. Recently we expanded their pasture to give them access to more browse.

When MyKeeper finished installing the new fenceline, he took down the old fencing. The goats didn't even notice.

He wanted them to know what a nice thing he did for them, so he went out to the far corner and called them.

They didn't move or look up.

He took hold of a collar and tugged.

Nothing.

He flapped his arms and shooed them.

They kept on munching briar leaves.

He even went so far as to get the grain can and rattle it to lure them into their enlarged pasture.

They knew it was a trick. It wasn't anywhere near time for grain.

The goats ignored that former boundary all day. It was more than MyKeeper could stand.

Finally, one of the does passed over the invisible line. She probably knew where it was by her sense of smell, and of course the memory of an electric charge. Standing at the doorway, we could tell where the line had been by the length of the grass on each side.

Other goats followed. All except one.

Rosemary stood rooted, blocked by the invisible edge.

The others munched their way across the new field, eventually capering with joy when they found a patch of dense growth.

Several times they left the field for their familiar browse stations, and then returned for more fresh weeds. But Rosemary wouldn't budge.

Huh-unh! No!!

She just knew the others would pay for their temerity. She lay right at the boundary, her forelegs crossed in front of her as adamantly as any

person with their jaw clenched and arms crossed in front of them.

Rosemary rejoined the herd each time they came back over to her side. It seemed like she was telling them, Don't know how you got through to the other side, but I would certainly get zapped if I tried it.

After dinner I went out to them. They clustered around me. I "browsed" with them A couple of steps, stop, munch (that was them, not me, I prefer barbequed chicken). A couple more steps and wait, then a couple more. I stared off to the south as I crossed that menacing line. Rosemary crossed it with me. I kept going, a couple of steps at a time. The others moved out ahead. Rosemary stayed by me.

A couple more steps, and then Rosemary's eyes bulged out. Her head popped up, and her tail. Somehow she managed not to bolt. She looked at me, then back behind her.

I put on my very most innocent expression, the one I had stored, leftover and unused, from my youth. It was probably from the one time Mama didn't catch me at the cookie jar, or hitting one of my sisters. Rosemary peered at me with a questioning look.

I told her, Yes, it's OK. Honest. And I moved two more steps inward. She looked at the ground again,

back at me, and over to the goats threshing goodies from the dense, green patch. She went over to get her share.

MyKeeper snickered from the doorway. He swears my critters have taught me their language.

Noah's first stop...

The first days on our Texas county road left us aghast at the crowd of grasshoppers that co-owned the property. Neighborly folks told us it was the year of the grasshopper.

Over the next few days we unpacked boxes, arranged furniture, and explored the acreage from corner to corner. We discovered that it was also the year of the ant (red ants, fire ants), the year of the wasp, the year of the mouse, and the year of the grass burr. It could have also been named the year of the cricket, the year of the spider, and especially of spider webs. AND the year of the fly!

I had never seen so many bugs. It made me wonder how Texans managed to co-exist with so many creepy crawly creatures.

Noah came to mind. Can you picture him gathering critters two by two and finding a place for each pair in his Ark? And think how much feed and bedding he had to haul into that ancient vessel. I was

thinking how many pens and nests and shelters he needed to provide within those cubit measurements. I bet Noah's wife reminded him not to forget the shovels. And a mop.

He was likely pretty happy to have his large family with him when it came to chores. And I wondered which part of the Ark they saved for their own quarters.

Lost to musing, it occurred to me how the days might drag, all the waiting and watching and rocking on the waves. I got to thinking how they might run low on food for themselves, or feed for the animals. Noah was probably itching to get off that boat before the elephants got too rowdy, or before the skunk duo got too irritated at those pesky coyotes. And I'll bet he couldn't believe how many rabbits were crowding the hutch.

Returning to the house after a tramp across our acres, I beat a grasshopper through the front door and slammed it. Right then I decided that even though the Ark finally landed somewhere far to the east, their first stopover was right here in West Texas. I don't know how they did it. Maybe the geography was different then.

Here's how it must have happened. When the Ark first touched down, Noah flung wide the gates and said, "Whew! Get those bugs OUT of here!!!"

Ritual

On the way to
a favorite place
we stopped
stretched
kicked some leaves
crunchy, crisp maple leaves
kicked some more
Remember when?
The one thought
turned up more.
We reminisced. And kicked.
Pulled out lunch.
Sat beneath a maple,
soaked up dappled sunlight
chirps and crinkles
The favorite place? Another time.
Today begins a tradition
fitting for Autumn.

Hog sale...

Two men stepped into the pig pen: MyKeeper and the neighbor from down the road who wanted to purchase a couple of our whey fed hogs for the freezer.

We had penned the weaners when they were little - a chubby bunch of porkers with voracious vegetarian appetites. From outside the pen, we fed and watered them for months, but it was inevitable that the day would dawn when they would be loaded up and sold.

Seeing the men invade their space, the hogs dashed as one in a wild panic, swerving in and out between legs and staying out of reach. The pigs seemed to know these guys were amateurs, and they would not be duped.

MyKeeper kept up a valiant pursuit, while the neighbor fell back to watch. He might have been trying to devise an easier method of capture, but it's more likely he was enjoying the show.

It was a scene of surreal turmoil, a collage of chasing and dodging, cornering, evasion, and escape. And through it all the air was filled with ear-splitting piggy screeches.

Teamwork was lacking, so I climbed into the pen to help. I've seen pigs corralled before. It looked easy. This was not going to be easy. Nor would MyKeeper ever admit defeat.

I did my best to keep heading them back toward him. He greeted them with open arms, but they eluded him every time.

At last MyKeeper caught a hoof and held on for dear life. The pig didn't stop, so MyKeeper made a dive and slid into the muck like a baseball player snagging first base.

The fevered hog ran headlong into the fence - bumped it so hard it flipped up and let him under. It was a madhouse reversal. There was the pig, almost free, and MyKeeper sprawled on his belly in the pen. The only connection was a strangle-hold grip on one kicking, flailing, twisting, wrenching hoof.

Through my head flew visions of MyKeeper dragged through the welded fence panel and strained through the grid - something like a potato diced into french fries.

In a split second panic I shoved my weight against the panel and lifted it just as the pig dragged MyKeeper under it.

At this point I don't know who was squealing loudest, but soon the pig wearied and My(Exhausted)Keeper lashed a rope around its hind feet. The pig and the man lay panting and glaring at each other.

Then there was another pig to catch.

The guys graduated from that school of hard knocks. They let the pigs settle down, backed the truck up to the gate, sprinkled corn and barley from the pen to the cage, and left the pigs to load themselves. I don't remember all the details, because it's more fun for me to remember the other part.

Peaceful pastures...

Think how soul-soothing peaceful it is driving down country roads, past barns and farm houses and fields dotted with wildflowers and farm animals.

Life on our county road has taught me it's deceptive, that pastoral scenery, and not nearly as bucolic as it looks from a car window at 50 miles per hour.

The critters that graze fields are let out AFTER they've been fed or milked or birthed or doctored, and IF they survive their illness or injury. Tenders of livestock cram their daylight hours with chores. They neuter, dehorn, dock, brand, breed, and sometimes bottlefeed. They clean bottles and wounds and pens. They rescue critters from weather extremes, poison weeds, and the numberless pitfalls of an unfriendly environment.

Our goats kidded recently, and there were many complications.

Naomi lost her kid. I don't mean it perished. I mean she left it off somewhere while the herd grazed. Like fawns, kids don't move a muscle to give away their hiding place, and when Naomi's kid came up missing, she came bawling to me.

I made a quick search of the shelter, circled around the outside, then scanned the field. The baby could be anywhere in all that tall grass.

The girls were enlisted, and we ran in four directions. Sweet Pea and Peanut struck out. Punkin found a skunk. Luckily, it was a standoff, because Punkin said it was the biggest skunk in the world. I don't know why it retreated to its den, but I'm sure glad it did. Now I can save that large can of neutralizing tomato sauce for another batch of spaghetti.

Running the perimeter of the field, I found the little one, more by instinct than sight. It lay heavily camouflaged by tree branches, briars, and a fencepost.

Next was Camilla. She decided her kid would have to air dry because she didn't like that taste. MyKeeper says if there was a finicky goat anywhere in the territory, of course it would end up being ours. We gave the slimy newborn a towel rubdown, thankful that it was a warm day.

Melinda dropped hers out in the field. Melinda's not too bright, and she is the one who is always last and always lost, but I thought she pulled off a brilliant plan that day. She's the only doe who chose not to battle the flies in the shelter. She and her kid were coated with "beggar's lice," though, and several other clingy weed seeds. Another major clean-up job.

Melinda's kid hadn't been on the ground more than a minute when Rosemary moved forward to check her out. Her own kid was already at her side, born a few days before.

Rosemary sniffed the soft little newborn. Hmm. Baby. To Rosemary's mind, one minute was long enough to qualify Melinda as a mother. She nudged her own kid toward the nursery and left with the other goats while Melinda doted over her newborn. Though the does have all taken turns, Melinda is most often selected to be the babysitter while all the others go afield to graze.

We couldn't figure what all the noise was about a bit later, but Leah was frantic. Round and round the shelter she went, calling her kids. They were there, all three snuggled together for the night and too comfortable to answer. I shoved one toward her, but she knew there were more. MyKeeper shined a flashlight on the other two kids and Leah rushed to them, greatly relieved. It doesn't seem possible, but

I believe we have a goat with night blindness. We'll feed her carrots.

By now our first-time mothers are settled into their parental roles, and the kids are all big enough to stay with the herd. If you drive by, it is a peaceful rural scene. But, oh, the trouble to get them there!

Some help...

Goats consider themselves helpers. This weekend, MyKeeper and I were out in their pen replanting a fencepost. I was on the shovel end of the job.

Stella could hardly contain her curiosity. She nosed the shovel and sniffed. I jabbed the shovel into the dirt. She shied away, but only for a second. She called the other goats over. She's boss. Their job is to follow her lead. Except for a few head butting conflicts of opinion, they do.

Now a group of goats are crowded in around me, sniffing the shovel. I can't move, so I stamp my foot, wave my arms, and chase them off. They aren't very scared of me. There is only time enough to scoop out one shovelful before Stella is back, the others close behind her.

Stella thinks the shovel smells awfully good. Wooden handles are second in choice behind tree

branches. She clenches her teeth and tries to tear off a bite.

It occurs to me that since MyKeeper is just standing around, he could do a better job of supervision. I suggest to him that he can keep the goats away while I dig more dirt. He says he'd rather watch the fun. He does his job well, too.

I wanted some help, but not from the goats. MyKeeper kept them at bay for a few minutes so I could work unhindered. But goat persistence tops all, and pretty soon Stella came back. She followed my every move with her nose. It was a few minutes before I realized that the reason I couldn't seem to get at the post hole was because the whole herd milled between me and the shovel. Some help!

MyKeeper is laughing. It's a talent that comes easily to him. I'm tempted to forgive him. Almost.

When I lean over to pick up the fencepost, I find myself reaching over the back of a goat. Five goats help me lift it into place.

Finally, I extricate myself from the goat committee. The post stands upright and firm, the fencing attached with clips. MyKeeper fastened the clips. Goat muzzles assisted him. It's my turn to laugh. I did.

The fence repair could have been a five-minute job, but with the help of all my goats, it turned out to be a twenty-five minute job.

MyKeeper said they should be rewarded for their assistance. Especially Stella, for being the most diligent. Turning to her, he asked, "Would you like to go to a barbecue?" To me he whispered, "She'd make a fine barbecue, don't you think?"

Fencing 'em in...

Fence making is routine for farmers and ranchers. Putting up an electric fence is no big deal. Except around here. Nothing gets done around here without a hefty measure of the catastrophe factor.

It took only a few hours to pound fence posts and string wire. But the charge was so weak it didn't faze the goats. The box the charger came in said "for livestock" and "for up to six miles." Picture of cows, goats, and sheep encircled the words. I showed it to the goats. They were unimpressed.

The next charger didn't work. We should have known. The box was retaped shut and had a customer name written on the lid flap.

Days later and two more stores later, another charger. No surprise, the goats broke out and the dogs broke in. There were tangled wires, sprung wires, bent wires, and stretched wires. Wide gaps. Easy exit.

Each time, as soon as the goats got out, they made a mad dash for my new peach trees. Even though the spindly trunks are wrapped with welded panel for protection, the leaves are gone now, along with half the branches. The poor baby trees have been mauled flat to the ground more than once. I fear for their survival. Trees need to be upright.

Every day MyKeeper assured me the fence was fixed. Each morning it went like this:

Run and get a can of grain.

Unhook the top fence wire and hop over.

Open the gate.

Enter the pen, holding the can high.

Push the goats off me.

Throw the grain into their feed trough to distract them.

Dash to the gate and hook it open, leap over the wires, reconnect the electric fence, race to the house - up the steps - open the outlet cover - grab the cord - plug in the charger...

I turn around and there are the goats, on the porch steps behind me.

More grain.

Unplug everything.

Get the goats back in the pen.

Start over again at Step One.

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 briers, 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. Watchers from a local group in Abilene say the Abilene Zoo is the first official Monarch Sanctuary on the butterfly highway 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. A secondary effort was also approved, so Texas claims the Monarch as State Insect.

Monarch watchers worry as more and more milkweed is lost. It is a weed, after all, and gets plowed under or sprayed away. Butterflies depend on it for food and nursery.

Milkweed grows wild, but doesn't much like to be coddled or cultivated. Some gardeners help by planting butterfly gardens with lantana, buddleia, daisies and sunflowers. Loving butterflies means you must also love caterpillars. It's one of their stages of development, so it's part of the package. According to butterfly lovers, the Monarchs are worth the preservation.

All the revealing research makes the Monarch
march less obscure, but no less mystical.

Storm's Coming...

Puffy clouds
crawl atop thermals,
hoist walrus weight
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.

But competition is good. It has expanded his vocabulary, and certainly increased my understanding of how words can be used.

The other day I opened a cupboard and saw a splotch of brown stuff splattered on the edge of a shelf, and a dab or two on the wall. Curious. I noticed cracker crumbs on the counter, too. Then I knew what it was. I got this picture in my head:

MyKeeper, trying to spread a knife full of peanut butter on a thin, crisp cracker. I cleaned up the mess, snickering all the while.

Later that afternoon, the peanut butter picture leaned hard on my will power. I grabbed four crackers, a saucer, the knife, and the peanut butter jar. I could hardly wait, it smelled so good. I dug out some peanut butter and slopped it on a cracker. Ummmm. Good.

Next cracker. I pressed a dollop of peanut butter to the cracker, and SPLAT!!! The cracker crumbled, and there was peanut butter all over the cupboard door.

I don't know what made me do it, but I couldn't resist a taunt next time MyKeeper walked by. Picture this.

I chose my words and timing with the artistry of a stand up comic. Hands propped on hips and elbows out, I said, "I want you to know..."

His shoulders scrunched up at the accusing tones.

"that I..."

His eyes looked hooded.

"am every bit as good..."

His jaw jutted out.

"as you are..."

He turned to glare.

"at flinging peanut butter all over the kitchen."

Picture him now. Is that a winner?

Diamonds in a Blue Day...

The redbird swooped from tree to tree, then to a fencepost near the kitchen window. When the phone rang, I still kept my eye on the flash of color that brightened the winter landscape.

It was my daughter calling. She was trying to tell me something, but the redbird flew off to perch on the bare rosebush. I leaned forward to keep the bird in view. "There's the prettiest redbird out in the garden," I told her. "I've been watching it flit all over the place."

"Mom!" said Puddin'.

"Oh, there it goes again. It's been doing the same thing over and over."

"Mom! I'm trying to tell you..."

I laughed at the bird's antics and relayed a running commentary to Puddin'. "I wish you could see this. It's so funny. The bird..."

Puddin' interrupted. "Mom! This is funny, too. Listen! We got the Christmas tree up today."

"Oh, that IS funny." I laughed at my own corny humor, keeping my eye on the bird. "Here it comes again, that silly bird!" I told her how the bird tried over and over to settle at the edge of the dog's water dish for a drink. Gretchen crouched at the doggie door with her ears perked up. Each time the redbird landed, he'd dip his beak in for one sip before Gretchen rushed out the door to scare him off.

"No, here's the funny part." Puddin' told me how the girls came from their room to help decorate the Christmas tree. Peanut and Sweet Pea picked up a handful of ornaments and tinsel. The youngest reached for a branch, but stood there facing the tree with her arm frozen in midair.

Puddin' asked her, "What's the matter, Peanut?"

"Hmm...Just seems like the tree looks smaller this year."

"The tree's not getting smaller," Puddin' explained to them. "You're getting bigger!"

It's always the diamond moments set in a big blue day that make life so memorable.

Gourmet Dinner for

Eight

Eight around the table,
ironed napkins tonight,
with two-fork setting
and sumptuous smells
from the kitchen.
Mom, with a flourish
reveals the meal,
medallions of hot dog
swimming in beans,
a shimmery bake
in brown sugar,
and something more,
not a taste, but a flavor,
the thing that ties the
meal to memory -
family chatter.

A worm story...

Sweet Pea fumed, mad at her sister, so my company ran a close second choice for the moment.

While I continued weeding in the garden, she stood first on one foot and then on the other, all the time with her arms crossed in front of her and a glum line where her smile used to be.

Pretty soon she bent over to pluck a weed near the honeysuckle. She found another and another, then paused to breathe in the fragrant perfume of the flowering shrub.

Twisted among the roots of one of the pulled weeds was a worm. Sweet Pea was ishy-delicate about touching it until I picked it up and handed it to her. "Worms are good," I told her. "We want them in our garden."

"Are these fishing worms?" she asked. I told her I didn't know if people fished with angleworms I only knew about night crawlers for fishing. They're big, and fish love them.

In the fascination of discovery, the grumpies were forgotten, and she took the worm for a walk. She came back with a flat metal pan scrounged from somewhere around the yard, and asked if she could use it. I nodded.

I kept gardening, and Sweet Pea returned now and then. She went into the house to grab a jacket, then asked where she could find a jar. She brought by a succession of pipes and elbows and scraps of sheet metal, and disappeared around the corner for long periods. At one point she brought an old discarded kettle to the garden to fill with dirt.

A bit later, she came back around the corner. "Come and see!" she said. I gathered up my stiff bones, straightened up, and followed her to the other side of the house. She had created a masterpiece of construction with the spare parts and pieces scavenged here and there. I can't think of anything to liken it to, except maybe a still or some kind of a Rube Goldberg contraption. I was properly impressed with her creativity, and said so, adding, "It's in the driveway, though."

Right on cue, Mama drove up, easing the car around the construction site under the direction of Sweet Pea's excitable hand signals.

Mama and Grampa admired the invention, and after Sweet Pea left the wind howled and the rain pounded. Her "thing" blew over. Some of its sections

tumbled around the house, parts of it strewn farther and farther before the wind. The lighter weight pieces ended up by the back doorway, and got kicked aside at some point.

A few days later, all that remained was the kettle, filled with dirt. Before Sweet Pea returned, even that was demolished. The car backed over it.

Sweet Pea was in mourning over the destruction next time I saw her.

"I'm sorry, Honey," I said. "It was a pretty interesting thing you made out of all those scrap pieces."

"It was my WORM FARM!!! she wailed. "I was going to grow big worms, and sell them, and make lots of money! And now look!"

It's awfully hard watching big dreams go down the tubes. Especially when I'm not aware it's a big dream. All I could see was a loosely but artistically connected conglomeration of metal bits and pieces, and a kettle full of dirt.

I think that's why the future is left to the younger generation.

Nick-of-time chicken...

The hen was a "gift" from our neighbors. She was old, and ready for the stewpot, but they couldn't do it to her themselves. She was more to them than just a laying hen. She was their pet.

She had free range in the orchard across the road from us, but for her safety we put the chicken in one of the rabbit cages. There, she was protected from the dangers of her new home. Our own small flock of chickens would likely attack her as an intruding stranger, and our dogs would think she was wild game until we could convince them she was one of us.

No decision about her longevity was made immediately. We fed her along with our other critters, and she continued to give infrequent eggs. Due to her age, her productivity was limited, but sized Extra Large.

The children from the family next door sneaked over to visit their old friend every once in awhile. It

sat hard on our conscience, so we couldn't put her in the stewpot, either.

The family came over as a group one day for a last visit to their pet. Mother said they had talked it over, and they were not to ask anymore if the hen was still alive.

Still the kids came over for a peek now and then. And the hen kept on laying occasional eggs.

As the season trailed onward there were fewer eggs, and the kids stopped coming by. Egg production slipped into the "seldom" category, and from there, down to "now and then."

MyKeeper and I stood near her cage talking one day. That was the day we first mentioned the stewpot.

The chicken must have heard, because next morning there was an egg in her nest. We voted a reprieve for her nick-of-time compliance, and let her go for a while longer.

There was another long stretch, but as soon as we uttered the word "stewpot," another egg was forthcoming. It went on for awhile like that, and we didn't think about her too much. All she wanted was a place to scratch for grit and seed, and to grow old grazing the green grasses she loved.

One summer afternoon we were notified to expect company the next day. I searched my

cupboards for menu items as I planned a feast. We had plenty of meat, and we had fresh vegetables from the garden. There was farm-fresh bread and cheese, and some snacky treats. What we lacked was something special for dessert.

Most of the eggs had been used for French Toast that morning for the six of us. In a cookbook search, I found a couple of one-egg recipes, but I had my heart set on Chocolate Fudge Brownies and Lemon Squares.

After a few frustrating minutes, it occurred to me that I knew just what to do.

I went out to the rabbit hutches and whispered into the chicken's ear. "Stewpot!"

Next morning I collected an extra egg, and we had enough for a big family breakfast and two luscious desserts as planned.

Saying "no" ...

I say no to telemarketers. They are hounding me to distraction right now. Spring brings them out in droves. They catch me in the middle of a million things. And they must have x-ray vision because they always know when it is most inconvenient to call.

The other day, I heard the phone ringing as soon as I got out of the car. I ransacked my purse for the house key, crashed through every room trying to locate the phone left somewhere off the charger, and answered with a breathless Hello, just in time to hear a recorded invitation to wait for the next available sales pitch. Much gnashing of teeth.

The telephone sales calls I hate most are the ones that come when I'm eating fried chicken or catching 20 desperate winks so I can be lively at an evening meeting. Their calls have caught me in deep thought, or in the middle of devising a good plot. They've bothered sick kids, fouled up a rushed schedule, and erased all recollection of what I was doing before the phone rang. They've disturbed

dinner, movie videos, good calls (from family or friends), and generally interrupted my "wa" (that came from Shogun.)

Yesterday's calls pushed me to the edge. Two salespeople called, one after the other. Both times, I had to run for the phone. I said No Thank You and hung up. Two more calls came soon after. I was on the phone to my daughter. I told the caller, no - don't call back when I'm not busy. I won't want to talk to you then, either.

We weren't 20 minutes into our call when the third call beeped in my ear. I clicked over to the other line. "Friend or telemarketer?" I demanded. (I did warn you I was near the frayed edge.) I continued, "If friend, call back in 10 minutes. If telemarketer, never! This is a recording!"

When I start to feel bad about such retorts, I remind myself I'm performing a valuable public service. If my response convinces even one telemarketer trainee to quit and go on with life, then it is worth my sharp words. I don't guess telemarketers will go away any time soon, but maybe they will merge into mega-marketers, and grow and grow until they start down-sizing. I can envision a call like this some day in the distant future:

"Hello. This is Cynthia. You don't have to wait for the next available agent. This is the only call you will receive this month. This message is not recorded.

I'm passing your call to Marian, who will be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail...Hi! This is Merry Marian! How are you today? I know you are a busy person and so our company will take only a moment with this combo-call. Tell me, do you need any roof repairs, credit cards, or phone service changes? No? Well, how about signing up to win a free ocean cruise. Or you could check out our dynamite insurance policy, or..."

Just musing in an idle moment. Oops! There goes the phone...

Washing dishes

I have no time for washing dishes, but I must make time for just that. Not to be neat. Not to get them done. Not because the counters are crowded. And certainly not just because there are no clean dishes in the cupboard. Heck, I can use paper plates, styrofoam cups, plastic bowls and spoons. Even for the oven, stores carry a ton of disposable baking pans.

The reason I need to find time to do dishes is that I'm desperately in need of mindless drudgery. I shouldn't call it that. There's cause for appreciation, and many reasons to be grateful for the benefits of mindless drudgery.

I remember the thrill of helping Mom at age six. Back then it was a privilege. Mom set a chair beside her and I stood at her elbow. What an achievement. Finally! Allowed to help with the dishes.

All I can say is that was a long, long time ago. By now I know the truth. Dishwashing takes up a lot of

time, dries out your skin, and has to be done again as soon as you're through. A conspiracy, I'm sure.

A sinkful of sticky dishes calls to me again. Sidling up to the edge, I pick up the soapy washcloth and one soaking plate. Rub. Scrub. Swish. Swish. One dish. Two dishes. While my hands are busy my mind lifts off, wandering in search of inspiration. Outside my window is the pleasant hill of the back yard. Beyond that is a hayfield, a river, foothills, sky, and dreams. Yes, day dreams, planning dreams, memory wandering dreams, and Beyond-Your-Wildest Dreams.

That's why the mindless drudgery of dishwashing should have a much more fitting moniker of honor. My soul is what benefits most from washing dishes. While my hands are occupied with a mundane task, my mind sneaks away to an unplanned tryst.

The starting place is always the dishes. But my mind can't be caged. It runs to the fields, just to feel the breeze. Then it sits beside the barn cats taking their siesta in the safety of the goat pen. It chases the birds, watches the corn and pea vines sway in the breeze, follows the dogs on their way to the river. Dots of laughter start a search for the dot-sized children on the next farm. Oh, there they are, under that tree. Then off up into the sky, above the highest-flying birds, to the waiting ether. In the place of uncounted time, I find the inspiration I

needed. I jump up and down and laugh, grabbing at the treasure, stuffing the words in my pocket, in my sleeve, in my wash cloth. Oh, there I am, back in the world. Back to the sink. I had been to the moon to find the thing I couldn't see - the thing that was there all the time. My story words are dancing through my mind and I'm running to the keyboard. The rest of the dishes will just have to wait.

Yes, I have no time for dishes. I just need something to keep my hands busy while I stare out that window.

Boots and belts...

"Are you wearing those boots to work today?"
It was me asking.

"Which ones?" MyKeeper asked over the lip of his coffee mug.

"The ones with the hole in one."

"No," he answered, "Why?"

"Because I have this belt..." I started to explain. He threw up his hands. "Stop right there. You're doing it again. This is way too early in the morning." Off to the kitchen he went, muttering to no one in particular, "See what I have to put up with?" What he really wanted was some affirmation that he was managing to stay sane even while dealing with me on a daily basis.

He made an attempt to latch onto some cog in the conversation. "What's my boots got to do with your belt? Incidentally, that's MY belt," he added, risking a conversational shift that would take us off the chart before he could get to the end of the first

leg. To avert a dialogue going two ways at once, he asked, "Are we getting to the point yet?"

"Oh, heh-heh, you want me to start at the beginning, don't you?"

"Just tell me the story in a nice straight line."

Too often, I start a conversation in the middle. From there, it can go either way and not necessarily end up at the end. I forget that he hasn't heard the mental conversation going on in my head when I blurt out the part where the question is. I know what I mean, but he misses out on the thing that got me thinking about it in the first place. He hasn't a clue how far the thought traveled in my head before I opened my mouth.

When I pop out with, "Oh, and they'll be here on Tuesday," MyKeeper is left to pry out the supporting facts to find out who, where, what and why.

I've been known to say something like, "Well, Megan said she was going even if no one else did." The blank look on MyKeeper's face signals me I've done it again. The part I forgot to say first is that there was an early afternoon telephone call from Megan about the upsets leading to the probable cancellation of a group gathering, including all the details of her disgust with the falling apart thing after all the work she had put into making arrangements and contacting everybody. All I did

was leave out the long, gradual build-up and start at the most pertinent point.

MyKeeper is used to this. A few minutes later, he was leaning against the kitchen doorway with his second cup of coffee. "OK," he said. "I think I'm ready for this now. Fill me in."

I explained, "My belt buckle broke, even though it used to be yours, and I am going to take it to the shoe repair. I thought I could take your boots in for new soles at the same time."

He shook the early morning cobwebs from his head. Looked to me like he had succumbed to the logic. He thought it over for a minute. With his hand on my shoulder, he looked me in the eye and asked, "What's wrong with saying it like this: I'm going to the shoe repair shop today. I'll take your boots, too."

"Well," I said, "that's simple. Isn't asking better than telling?"

*Echoes of the
Song*

Some songs ring through the ages - enduring and
endearing - with a beauty like
burnished silver

The yellow bowl...

Punkin had just thrown out a failed recipe of boiled frosting. It was the second flop in her attempt to make a fluffy mountain of icing for my birthday cake. This was the very recipe that frosted her blue ribbon cake at the West Texas Fair two years ago, and now she was having fits.

She was on the phone to me for the second time. "I know what's wrong, Gramma! It needs to be mixed in the yellow bowl!"

The yellow bowl is one of the treasures of inheritance from my mother. From her earliest dishwashing age, Punkin understood the sentiment of the legacy, cautioned by my words, "Be extra careful with the yellow bowl."

One surviving bowl of a gift set for Mom's first kitchen, it would be dated right around 1940, but not one of us kids ever thought about that the number of times it nearly slid off the counter, or while we rapped a mixing spoon against the edge. It endured

the rough handling of a large family who used it nearly every day for one thing or another.

It is heavy ceramic, with muted ridges ringing the top. The glaze is dulled, and it's a little crazed with age, but no more so than keep me. It has a couple of chips, and on one side is a Liberty Bell type crack from lip to base. As the heirloom survives each use, it becomes more precious for its memory of her. And over the years, it has impressed me with the lesson it teaches about the fragility yet the tenacity of life.

Lifting the bowl down from the cupboard for Punkin, I'm that girl of eleven again for a minute, mixing my first cakes and brownies and cookies, pancakes and biscuits. I can smell the spice cake mix I poured over pineapple and brown sugar, impatient for the aroma of pineapple upside down cake to come wafting from the oven.

Holding the mixing bowl hugged to me evokes a few more pictures from my past: hands forming pie crust dough into a ball, lettuce and tomatoes glistening in their salad dressing, mashed potatoes heaped to the top, capped with a pat of butter and prettied up with paprika.

I'm still surprised each time I pour batter into pans, because the bowl used to be much bigger. When I was a moppet, it was heavy to hold with one hand while spooning with the other.

That sun-colored vessel was big enough to set on the floor, circled by me and my sisters eager to lick the last of the chocolate frosting. It was large enough to contain all the splashes I made while beating 300-stroke cakes by hand. And it held all the leftovers of Sunday Soup till Monday. The soup was better Monday, especially knowing it was almost gone. I think I'm the only one of our large family who didn't like that soup.

A couple of hours later, Punkin came back to the house with her mother and made a finger-licking good, frothy boiled frosting for her grandmother's cake (that's me) in her great-grandmother's yellow bowl. It was a significant moment in history - a four generation link - a fleeting ancestral bond.

Sweet Pea's allowance...

Sweet Pea loomed larger as she approached the driveway. I'd watched her from way down the road, thinking how much she'd grown these past few years. It seemed like just yesterday that we moved to Texas. Sweet Pea came here as a third-grader. Now she's in high school.

MyKeeper, standing beside me, picked up on my thoughts and said, "She hardly resembles the girl who almost cleaned out the collection plate does she?"

His words drew a vivid picture of grade school Sweet Pea on my mind. When we first settled in Texas, MyKeeper and I decided on an amount to give the girls for an allowance. It was supposed to teach them to plan for the things they wanted to do, but it taught us more than it taught them.

Anyway, the allowances were parceled out to Punkin, Sweet Pea, and Peanut on a regular schedule. One week there was a shortage of cash that would

cover only two allowances. Sweet Pea was the one who consented to wait for hers. It was Wednesday.

On Thursday and Friday, Sweet Pea asked if I had gone to the bank for cash yet. Saturday morning she asked if I had forgotten. I reminded her it would be Monday before I would have her allowance.

Sunday morning we filled a pew, stood to sing a hymn, heard prayers and liturgy and sang another hymn. Just before the sermon, the ushers gathered the offering. As the collection plate came to me, I stuck a bill in it and passed the plate into the hands of the usher.

Two seats away from me, Sweet Pea gasped. She fixed me with an accusing glare and whispered loudly, "You mean you gave my allowance to HIM?"

Lesson Plan

A lesson trains
young minds, I thought,
but what the child brought
will always amaze.
How it turned

in little brains,
no matter the plot,
what I thought I taught
is not always
what they learned.

Might have missed...

The other day I was thinking of all the scenes I carry around with me, places on earth that sparkle in my mind, places I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't gone through the struggle to get there.

One view that sticks in my mind is Bridal Veil Falls. It would be beautiful even if we could have driven to see it, but my first glimpse of Bridal Veil Falls followed a lengthy hike in drizzly Northwest weather. We could have stayed by a warm fireplace, but then I would have missed the sight that took my breath away and stopped me in my tracks. We'd been climbing, climbing, climbing, and suddenly, shimmering lace drifted over the face of a broad, smooth boulder. Spray fell like chiffon and feathers, sprinkling into a deep pool below. The waterfall had been there for centuries and eons, but that day I was there to see.

Another hike, I almost walked into a perfect polygonal web drawn between two mountain shrubs by a common brown speckled spider who sat in the

center. The spider was patiently waiting for dinner to come by, unaware of the perfection it had created. I'd seen a lot of these webs, but this rare specimen glistened, taking from the gray gloom a fair mist that robed it in diamonds.

Inclement weather nearly canceled the hike. Instead I carry with me a picture I could never draw. My mind holds it in exquisite detail, ever since that day in my childhood.

Near the end of my teen years, I was included in an October hike. The trail was twisty, narrow, and vertical. We climbed the steep mountainside, dragging the horses that were supposed to follow us. We stumbled past tree roots and fallen logs and intruding underbrush. Pack loads kept slipping over the horses' sides and had to be righted.

About half way up, I scrambled over a fallen tree, lost my balance and fell. My horse's lead rope slipped from my hand. I looked up to see him poised to jump over the log. His front legs were raised, hooves pawing the air. My screams were drowned by everyone else's, and the horse shied back. I can still "see" the horse, huge above me, treetops and sky a vast backdrop.

Five hours later we made it to the top. I was drained. I cried. Someone handed me a candy bar. I ate it, blubbering. All I could think of was that we would also have to get back down.

Revival came in little bits and pieces, broken by sighs. I shivered. We had climbed from cool, clear weather, to snow. I stood up and stretched, then walked a dozen yards to the peak of the mountain while the others put up the tent. Before me was a snow-capped panorama that didn't stop until I had turned a complete, 360 degree circle. We were at the top of the world, standing on a pinnacle.

This alpine view hides in my mind, cradled in mists and clouds and the haunting blue light from an overcast sky. This alpine view hides in my mind, cradled in mists and clouds and the haunting blue light from an overcast sky. Rusted tin cans were evidence that others had been there, too. But the scene doesn't play to everyone, only those who climb the hill.

It took a great deal of exertion to get to these places. I went there not knowing what I was going to see. Now these treasures go with me, around every bend and up over every hill in my life. I can't show them to anyone. I can't leave them for anyone. They are just there in my mind for me to enjoy, and maybe to pick up as threads to weave into the story of my own spinning.

Clabbered milk...

Do you remember clabbered milk? Likely not. Sometimes the world turns so fast, things of the past just disappear off the face of the earth. For instance, dinosaurs. No one has seen any of those for years.

Mostly, it's only those who have made their way bravely into geriatrics who carry the memory of creatively soured milk with them.

They also remember transportation before cars, spelling bees, treadle sewing machines, box suppers, and the horse- drawn plow. They cranked telephones and the first Ford engines. They stared at the radio in the middle of the living room, and at the first miniature black and white TV screens set in massive cabinetry.

They made their own butter until oleomargarine came packaged in white blocks at the grocers. Pretty soon, all they had to do was squeeze the button on a plastic casing to work yellow color through the blob.

I can still hear my Dad's voice lamenting, "It's a shame they don't teach penmanship in school anymore." My own generation, my kids, and their kids, grew up without having to draw spiraling circles across a whole lined page. But all the octogenarians remember.

In our neighborhood, Newton milks his own goats. I try to keep his fresh goat milk at the front of his refrigerator and feed the older milk to the cats. "Oh, honey," he says, "don't worry about me. I grew up on soured milk." He has an iron gut. At his age, he hurts in his muscles and bones, but he can eat anything he wants. He spends a lot of time in the kitchen fixing his favorites.

All those cultured milk processes were ways to preserve old milk. People made cottage cheese, butter, cheese, yoghurt, clabber, and fermented milk products. They used the whey left over from the cheese curds, and drank the buttermilk left after the lump of butter was formed, which they remember was just before the churner's arm fell off.

All this because they lacked one crucial modern convenience. Refrigerators!

There were seven children and two parents in Newton's family. He says it was nothing for them to drink two gallons of milk at one meal. Surplus milk made milk toast for breakfast, cornstarch pudding,

bread pudding, and baked custard. The rest was cultured and preserved.

Folks flavored their clabber or buttermilk with sorghum syrup or honey, and Newton laughs remembering that one brother seasoned his with pepper!

Pearl is a spry teeny-bopper in her 80s. She loves the taste of clabbered milk, and the memories it brings along with it. She says she still has the churn she grew up with, and other items, like their butter bowl.

B.J., in his 90s, was failing fast after a third surgery. But there is no frailty in the man. He threw away his medicines, went out to sit under a tree and make himself well. He dosed himself with fresh air, healing exercises, and goat milk - the magic medicines of healing, he says. These days, he walks with canes, but he walks, and visits, dines out, and travels.

I tried some clabbered milk. Sure don't care much for it. So far, I haven't found anyone under the age of 70 who remembers or appreciates it.

There's much more than flavor laced among the molecules of clabbered milk. One sniff of the beverage carries with it the treasures of youth and family for those who lived with no refrigerators.

Someday there won't be anyone who remembers push-pulls, switchboards, or clabbered milk, but I don't want that to happen without tribute to the durable folks who grew up on sour milk, and learned to love it.

Stringing words...

Fifty lights. There are 50 bulbs on each strand of lights that trim our Christmas tree. Fifty lights strung together that must work together or they don't work at all.

I'm deep in thought here, transfixed by the soft glow of colors against green branches, hypnotized by twinkling tinsel. The same 50 lights create a new picture each year. The trees we decorate from year to year never look exactly the same.

Like letters. Twenty-six letters, strung together, create all the sounds of our language, all the words we utter, all the stories we read. Only 26 letters, arranged in hundreds of way to make up the thousands of words we use in millions of sentences.

A local author and workshop leader often asks listeners to fold a piece of paper in half, and keep folding it. One small rectangle on the page represents all the people in the world who can read and write in any language. She uses it to impress

upon us that if we have the gift of writing, we can't keep it to ourselves, but must feel a duty to pass it on.

Writing the Great American Novel is not the only way to share. A poem, a letter, a note of comfort or congratulations - all of these are ways to pass around the gift of words. I always appreciate the historian in a family, the one who preserves memories the rest of us forget. Some dig into genealogy, and some have found enough interest among their relatives to publish a family newsletter.

Writers from our area have written devotions for inspirational websites, crafted greeting card messages, entered writing contests, compiled cookbooks, and written every kind of magazine article. Several have written educational curriculum and Sunday School lessons. Texans are consummate recorders of history from every aspect. A few have made a major commitment to correspondence that uplifts shut-ins and those with specific health issues.

The Christmas holiday once again passes before us. Hiding behind a thinning veil is another new year.

Twenty-six letters. It's got me thinking. Before it's time to string lights again next year, I resolve to string letters and words across pages and pages in dozens of new ways. I'm ready to tumble through

the doorway of another new year with a handful of pens and a tablet.

And may all who love to write find a way to bless others with the gift that has blessed them.

Granny's sepia profile...

Mom always said I looked a lot like Granny Bishop.

I'd look in the mirror at my little girl face, and compare it to the grim sepia visage staring out of a very old photograph, and I'd wonder how Mama could say that about me. To me, there seemed no resemblance at all. And what's more, I didn't think I could ever look like that.

Mama explained to me there were no camera smiles in those days, and that Granny Bishop actually had a pretty smile and bright, loving eyes. She said you couldn't even wiggle while the photographer stuck his head under a black hood and pulled a chain to expose a glass plate. She described the bulky cameras with their accordion pleats from those days before celluloid film.

Make no mistake. Granny Bishop was a good person. She loved me a lot. Mom said she liked to carry me around in her arms and hug me and tell

Grandpa Bishop how cute I was. My memories are fleeting, little gauzy bits of remembrance.

I vaguely remember their house in Seattle, most of it tucked in my heart and not in my mind. It had a warm, brown feeling, with lace curtains letting in a dappled light. There were dim lamps whose only brightness was in their ceramic character. I remembered, not really seeing, but sensing, a brown velvet couch, an oak upright piano, and brown frames around family photographs stepping up the wall with the staircase. Mama confirmed the veracity of my memory, reminding me that the couch and piano I grew up with were from her house.

A place I loved to sit was at the bottom of the dark, rich stained mahogany stair rail with its imposing carved newel. It was a focal point of the entry way, but to me it was a grand play area.

In the photo, Granny Bishop had gray hair swept away from her face and piled on top of her head. My memories said she wore chunky-heeled shiny black shoes laced around puffy ankles, and her coat was huge and thick and dark brown. I'm certain she was never aware that the lapel always bumped me in the nose when she bent over to gather me up.

That was so many years ago. I was looking at those pictures again recently. Thinking how I didn't get to know her for very long, that I was so young, and there is so little I remember of her. I was tilting

the photo this way and that, looking at her face from different angles, picturing the flat Kodak image fleshed out into three dimensions.

As I studied her features and compared them to mine, I noticed something. Maybe Mom was right! Now that my high cheekbones have sunk and my jawline has turned to jowls, I think...hmmm...yes, I just might look quite a bit like Granny Bishop.

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