

Tanking up in Texas...

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 - wisps of orange 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...

TEXAS – 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...

TEXAS – 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...

TEXAS – 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...

WASHINGTON – 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.