

A love for all occasions

Since it's almost Valentine's Day a word on love seems appropriate. While Valentine's Day has less to do with love than with retail sales, still it's a day dedicated to the contemplation and expression of romantic love. As a subject of song, story, fable and rhyme, love has no equal unless it's war.



EGGS IN MY POCKET

Mary Fenoglio

Wars have been fought for love of one kind or another; Helen of Troy, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, all driven by different forms of love. The Beatles sang "All you need is love," and they believed it, just like all hopeful young things believe it. So did I, and so did you, probably. We learn, alas, that it helps to have a bit more than that, but love in some form is essential to all of us. New-born babies abandoned in a hospital die for the lack of it and thrive when volunteers hold and cuddle them every day. Old people long for that same expression of affection, lost to them over the years.

When I was 15 I had my first "real" boyfriend, indeed the only one I ever had except the one I have been married to for 49 years. I shared my first kiss with him and it's true, you never forget it. Brief and chaste but absolutely electric – this was the early '50s, you know – it just made me giddy. He didn't have any money, but he carved me a wooden horse because he knew I was horse crazy. It was pretty ugly, I guess, but I cherished it until I lost it in our house fire. It said to me better than any fancy gift that he knew who I was and what mattered to me, and that's rare at any age.



Mary and John Fenoglio stand on their property, about which Mary told stories for years.

Young love like that is sappy, isn't it? But sweet with a sweetness that can't last. Hanging on the phone for hours just listening to each other breathe, after you've just been together for hours before that, with really nothing to say that you haven't said a hundred times already. Your folks are yelling at you to get off the phone right now, but you just can't bear to break the connection. One of you goes on vacation for a week and the one left behind suffers agonies; you can't eat, sleep or think until your beloved gets back. And if one of you looks at somebody

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Editor's Note

A name found within the pages of the Williamson County Sun since 1994, longtime *Eggs In My Pocket* columnist Mary Fenoglio died on February 8. A reader favorite since the column began, *Eggs In My Pocket* mixed the sights and scenes of rural Williamson County with Mary's personal storytelling about family, pets and life. Mary's first submission to the *Sun* was published January 19, 1994, and she began writing her column weekly in the early 2000s. It ran up until her death.

This special section is just a taste of her works from over the years, and is dedicated to her memory and her family, which was her muse.

Boxed in: a frustrating love of cardboard

Every once in awhile – more frequently as I get older – I run up against a problem that seems to have no good solution. If I’m lucky, it’s minor and I can shrug it off with my “I’ll tend to that after I feed the dogs/change the goose water/move the little chickens” approach, which translates to “next year or thereabouts.” At the moment, my problem is boxes. Actually, the problem is my attitude towards boxes. I like them. Nice, clean, sturdy brown boxes offer so many possibilities. They have four square walls, a top and bottom, and they are too good to just toss out.

Once upon a time boxes were a valued commodity around here; the grandkids loved them. Far and away the grandsons traveled in the cars and boats, planes and trains those boxes became. They rocked and rolled in them, curled up and snoozed in them, wore them out and tore them up in games I never knew the half of but loved watching. Sara especially always had a couple handy for sitting in with Muggles or other cooperative feline friends. Thus confined, she read to both cats and dogs, piled pillows and blankets in them and watched Sesame Street, dragged them from room to room with her toys in them and in general

made excellent use of an item some people would have cast aside.

Once, when the grandsons were about five years old, they constructed an elaborate edifice in the playroom consisting of several different sized boxes duct-taped together. They had pillows, blankets, a radio, a snack shelf, assorted cars and trucks, and several items of contraband discovered only upon the dismantling of the whole shebang after a couple of weeks of complete immersion in their project. Its construction consumed their time for days and was of more interest to them than the actual use of the finished house, until they began remodeling, enlarging and improving it. We all remember that playhouse fondly, I think. It gave me a whole new perspective on uses for cardboard boxes.

Cats love boxes; at least, our cats do. More often than not, if I leave a box unattended for any length of time it will be occupied by a cat curled up in it, paws over face, snoozing. (They like plastic bags, too, but I have no qualms about stuffing those into the recycling bag.) They take their toys into a box and turn inside out smacking it against the sides, or leave the toy inside, jump out and pretend they can’t find it, poking their paws

all around the bottom of the box and then peering over the top with a faux-surprised expression before jumping back in and beginning all over again. It’s good for several minutes of intense attention. How can I pitch something out that gives that much pleasure?

The Pushface Pack is only interested in a box if it contains a cat or has a tasty aspect to it; they have been known to shred small boxes into pieces requiring a broom and dustpan to collect. Maybe it’s the glue. Perhaps if it had a cozy blanket in it, they would hop in for a nap.

One of the frustrating things about boxes is that, while they come in all sizes, they almost never come in the size I need at the moment. Either the box in question is a hair too small to allow the top to close and fold over neatly, or it is cavernous and allows what I’m attempting to box up to slide around to the point of requiring newspaper stuffing to hold it securely. (I won’t even go into the newspaper issue I have; all that effort just read once and discarded.)

The Christmas season brings the box issue into full focus. Before Christmas, when gift-wrapping is in full swing, I never have enough boxes, and the ones I have are nev-

er the right size. It seems wasteful to wrap Sara’s little gold earrings in a box that held a case of wipes for the barn, and likewise an afghan won’t fit in a box that held two books. I would swap them out, but I seldom have the option. No one else in the family saves boxes, being neatniks and space-obsessed, so I’m up the proverbial creek.

After Christmas, there are boxes everywhere, of every size, shape and persuasion. I don’t need them now, but when asked whether I want to keep them I always answer yes, because having just done the seasonal box bit, I can’t stand to dispose of them. Now, what do I do with them for the next 12 months? They are in the way of almost everything, and I only need a couple to make the cats happy.

For now, just to get them out of the way, until I “get around to it,” I will put the small boxes into the medium boxes into the big boxes into the biggest boxes and store them...somewhere. I will then either forget where I stashed them or, in one of my infrequent cleaning-out frenzies, toss them. Either way, I’m right back where I started.

At least I’m consistent; the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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else with more than passing interest, it’s awful; it’s the end of life as the spurned one knows it. You can’t possibly live without him/her.

Sure you can. We grow up, hopefully, and learn who we are ourselves so that we can learn how to be half of a couple and do it well. From the first flush of romantic love when everything either one of you does is pure magic to that morning when you wake up and look at each other and think whatever made me think this was a good idea? To the day when you look at each other and think, I’m really glad we’re still together; it’s an evolving process. In that process we learn a little about the different kinds of love.

There’s the love expressed when he brings you flowers or chocolates and you don’t even mind when he eats most of them because he’s so wonderful and you love to watch him chew. Later there’s the love you’re so grateful for when he gets up at 3 a.m. and feeds and changes the baby when you think you’ll die if you have to do it again. Raising kids through teen years brings out a special kind of love, the kind with stamina and teeth in it. Still later there’s the love you couldn’t make it without when you get a diagnosis nobody wants and he says, it’ll be okay, we’ll be okay. Mixed in there somewhere is the love you hang onto grimly when he’s done something really stupid or you cross a line you’ve never crossed before and things are tightlipped and grim for a while.

Papa used to give me a potted rose on Valentine’s Day, and it’s a mark of the kind of love he has that he also planted the rose and almost always where I wanted it to go. After all this time I have learned what’s really important to me and it isn’t jewelry or cruises in the Caribbean. I want someone who understands what’s happening and what I need to get through it. When Sarge, my old gelding, had his last bout of colic and had to be put down, Papa helped the vet and then buried Sarge and didn’t make me go through any more than I had to. When my dogs die, he will reassure me that I have not been selfish and neglectful, thereby causing the demise of a 17-year-old friend, and will bury them gently and respectfully for me. He never tells me I can’t, but almost always tells me sure I can, and then helps me any

way he can, no matter what I’m trying. Two dozen roses one day of the year is no match for the steadiness of that kind of love.

He leaves cabinet doors open; he makes terrible messes and walks away to start a new project; the office is a wreck and while he can find a tiny scrap of paper in all that mess, he can’t find his socks. But he plays basketball with Sara almost every night out on the driveway, and he reads with Grandson Two with infinite patience and shows Grandson One how to do a project in the shop. He lets me sleep in the morning sometimes when I know he doesn’t want me to. I think I’ll keep him, at least until after our 50th anniversary.

It’s kind of sappy, maybe, but it feels pretty darned good to me. Happy Valentine’s Day.

New gardening season beckons

Let imagination soar when planting edibles and flowers

She's done it again. The foolish peach tree down in the orchard is blooming like crazy, just like she always does every spring. The other trees around her are loaded with round green buds just waiting for a few warm, sunny days to bring them around, but that foolish tree never can contain herself. Granted, she is an early peach, but there's early and then there's *early*.

It's not like she's a juvenile who doesn't know any better. She's been in the ground for at least 10 or 12 years, and I can't remember a year when she didn't jump the gun and pop blossoms long before anything else was blooming. She has brightened many a gray day with her rosy cloud of blossoms. Every year I've thought she would freeze and bear no fruit, but every year she has proven me wrong. Her branches are as loaded with sweet juicy peaches as any of her orchard mates who bloom much later.

I'm so fond of that silly tree that I wrote a poem inspired by her. It isn't her exactly, but it could be. The names are changed to protect the innocent. I'd like to share it.

*That upstart plum tree bloomed again.
Snow all around, hip high on a tall
man,
Deep blue nights crackling with cold,
But no matter! Two bright days,
Mild sunkisses, soft southern breeze
stroke
And she pops, shameless.
She floats above the snow, whiter still,
A cloud of dazzle, scent sharper for the
biting air;
Incandescent in the purple winter
Evening.
Her petals drift, settle on the crust,
White shadows.
She never sets a plum, that foolish thing,
Always too early in her blooming,
But how she fills the heart!*

A whole new gardening season beckons, and sitting down with a hot cup of something and the seed catalogs sends the imagination soaring. Ambition expands and increases the garden. This year we should put in an asparagus bed, and maybe try Brussels sprouts again. Most importantly,



A hummingbird stays busy at the San Gabriel Park's Sunken Garden in Georgetown on Tuesday, July 26, 2022.

ANDY SHARP

this will surely be the Year of the Perfect Tomato. Oh, for big, red, warm tomatoes sitting heavy in my hand!

That's how it all looks now, bundled into a sweater and heavy socks and sitting with my feet on the hearth. When July afternoons hit the triple digits and the whole world wilts under the furnace blast of the summer sun, enthusiasm wilts accordingly. The Perfect Tomato morphs into a project for the fall garden and it becomes a chore just to keep things alive until the weather cools off.

Why is it that in February, planning the garden, all things seem possible, but in July it just seems like a lot of sweaty work? There's the heat, of course, but it's more

than that. There are only so many ways to fix zucchini before you have to admit that you don't really like the stuff all that much to begin with, and while the 97th tomato is likely just as good as the first...somehow it isn't.

Still, it's always fun, the planning. Part of that planning is checking the signs for the best days to plant. Papa scoffs at the whole idea, even though his farmer grandfather was scrupulous in his attention to the signs with regard to planting, butchering, weeding and whatever else had to be done on the farm. Papa says the signs are right when you have time to get the plants into the ground, but I know better.

I once read to him out of *The Foxfire*

Book how to set fence posts so they would stay in the ground straight and solid. It had to be done in a certain phase of the moon. He went out and found the most crooked cedar tree he could and made a fence post out of it. I saw him set a straight post, and the next day he called me to come look at the new post. It was crooked as a dog's hind leg. He said the moon just pulled it right over and twisted it up, and he had me going for quite awhile. Of course, he had dug up the straight post and replaced it with the crooked one, just to razz me about my "signs."

Seemed like a lot of trouble to prove a point. I told him if he'd left the crooked one in the ground, maybe the moon would have straightened it out for him. You never know.

Wisteria under the stars

It was after dark a few days ago when I stepped out on the back porch with the Border Collies' food bowls and took a deep breath of cool, dewy air. It smelled like spring, and something else I didn't immediately retrieve from my catalog of scents. Sweet, heady and totally unexpected, not fresh grass, though there was that, I couldn't put a name to it. Meg sat at the gate to their yard, Estrella a bit behind her, ears flattened and tails wagging in greeting, grinning in anticipation of dinner and a friendly scratch or two. Mehitabel and Moose, two of the outside cats that accompany me on some evenings, sat at a respectful distance and watched, knowing that if they approached the yard Estrella would lunge at the fence with ferocious intent but obviously hoping to remind me that they had yet to be served their own dinner.

Because Meg is food aggressive, whoever feeds the Borders lingers in the pen until they have scarfed down their food, otherwise Meg has a very good dinner indeed and Estrella may go to bed hungry. Add to that the fact that if the bowls are left in the pen Meg exercises her obsessive tendencies and spends hours scooting them around and tossing them in the air while Estrella barks encouragement. And barks. And barks. Besides the obvious fact that human ears can handle sharp, staccato barking for only so long, this is not a healthy pastime, so we wait and collect the bowls. I was leaning against the big dog house, watching the last fading light in the western sky and looking for the first star (I like that childhood 'star light star bright first star I see tonight' thing) when the wonderful sweet scent lying in the air like a spun silk coverlet finally registered. On the trellis at the end of the house wisteria blooms hung ripe and heavy from vines as yet bare of any green, and the moist air enhanced the aroma I remember from childhood nights on my granma's porch.



Evening skies fill with warmth along U.S. Highway 79 near Taylor on Monday, August 15, 2022.

ANDY SHARP

There were only a few, and it seemed early for them, but then everything is blooming early this year. I had my conversation with the dogs, gathered up the bowls, and walked over to stand under the tangle of vines stretching over the arbor Papa built years ago to support them. I could see the small buds forming that would soon be drooping clusters of fragrant purple flowers spreading their unmistakable perfume to call in the small golden honeybees and big, lumbering bumble bees. They would busy themselves among the flowers, drinking the nectar, filling the space around the vines with a steady, audible hum. Standing under the arbor the scent of the flowers dropped down over me and I closed my eyes, transported back so many years to nights when I lay on my back on my granma's side porch, the concrete warm from the long summer day, the thick, heavy wisteria scent all around me, and watched for the first stars of evening. Days under the arbor my granddad built for the massive wisteria vines were slow and shady, filled with that rich scent and the comings and goings of bees among the long purple bracts dripping through the tangle of vines.

When I turned to go into the house there was one bright star in the western sky and I made the same wish I have made for many years. Of course, you can't tell wishes like that, or they never come true. Or so my

granma told me.

The Pushface Pack was waiting patiently at the gate for me and gave their obligatory but perfunctory barks at the two cats who ventured so close and no closer, then sat and viewed my pack with barely veiled contempt. They know a real threat when they see it, and somehow the Pushfaces don't strike fear into their hearts. I keep telling them they might be surprised, but they always seem to have something important to attend to, like a sudden wash, when I begin to explain how savage the small snub-nosed girls really are. "Just ask the squirrels," I tell Mehitabel earnestly, "It's for your own good." The look she gives me is politely disinterested; she yawns and strolls away, but I notice she never comes into the back yard, even when she has the chance, so maybe she takes my warnings more to heart than I think. With cats, you never know.

Once the outside dogs are fed it's the Pushfaces' turn. They lined up in the kitchen, sitting with eyes fixed on me, barely breathing. Breakfast was hours ago and in spite of a few clandestine snacks they may have garnered through the day, they are obviously in a weakened state from hunger. Lolly, the talker, usually cannot refrain from a sharp little urging bark or two; she also is the one who stands with forepaws against the cabinet door, eyes following my every move as I fill bowls and mix in a bit

of meat.

I toss small bites at them all in turn just because I like to; Lolly and Pepper can catch a piece of kibble from way across the room and never miss. Dali is learning; she nabs her bite in midair about half the time now. Zoe, my darling Frenchie, knows when it's her turn and her eyes brighten as I get her set up to catch. The thing is, at the critical moment she shuts her eyes and the bite bounces off her nose. Dali, sitting beside her, has observed this phenomenon, and is ready. While Zoe is opening her eyes and beginning to search for the bite, Dali has scooped it up, swallowed it, and is sitting perfectly still, perfectly innocent. When Zoe can't find the bite she knows I tossed her way, she gives Dali an accusing look, but Dali's gaze is fixed on me. I just gently put the next bite in Zoe's opened mouth. Some of us have good eye/mouth coordination and some do not. If you don't, that doesn't mean you never get another bite in your little life. Cuteness counts.

Bowls are distributed, older girls in the kitchen and puppies in the playpen. They are all respectful of each other, no squabbles. Two minutes later, dinner is done. Time for a little snooze with Mom while she dozes in front of that noisy big thing.

And outside the wisteria spreads its magic through the darkness as stars begin to pop all across the wide, wide sky.

The Marshmallow Hot Dog Roast and General Hilarity Evening

There is a spot in the pasture, just about halfway between our house and grandson one's house, that lends itself to gatherings. Something about the piece of ground under big trees, on top of the hill, washed by the ever-present upslope breeze, makes it a pleasant place to stop for a while. There was a small ring of stones made to contain a campfire, used occasionally by the boys and their friends for "camping." Big fallen trees made great natural places to sit and plan the next adventure.

In January, right after Christmas, son John (he of potato launcher fame) observed that we didn't get together very often and perhaps we should do so. This suggestion was received with some surprise because, while we are all fond of one another and live in close proximity on the farm, we have never been big on the gathering of the clan. First, there isn't much clan to gather and second, I've never wanted a situation where anybody looked at anybody else and said, "Oh, goodie. It's Sunday. Gotta have dinner at Mom's," and then appeared at said dinner looking like they were being dragged to their deaths and would much rather be at home defrosting the freezer. Come together with joy or just phone it in.

Oh, sure, we usually do something about birthdays and Thanksgiving and Christmas. Easter used to be a biggie because the kids loved hunting eggs and scrapping over who found the most/biggest/best. The Fourth of July we do barbecue and homemade ice cream at Grandson Two's house because there is an absolutely panoramic view of fireworks for miles around, plus a great place for the boys to do their own. Except for the odd school concert or impromptu barbecue, that about covers it.

We do stuff all right—welding the head gate to the chute so that it would swing to one side when Papa wanted to back the trailer up to it, cleaning out my parents' house, involving days of work and, ultimately, almost more togetherness than we were ready for. Building something, fixing something, finding something, all

task-driven. Once in awhile we may just sit in the front yard for a few minutes, catching up, listening to the grandsons roar past behind the house on their dirt bikes and collectively hoping aloud that everyone involved survives in one piece.

So the idea of a family night once a month or so was a surprise, but it sounded like a good idea. Something simple, nothing elaborate or fancy. John had just the spot: the "campground."

It has happy connotations. Once grandson two and a friend stayed all night, regardless of the fearsome badgers that

up and eyes blazing as she bayed at the threat to her boy. The second part of the team sat behind that same wide-awake boy, presumably as backup if Plan A failed, but not before. Flashlight beams probed the black shadows wildly, causing the badger to seek cover behind a big tree. He was having a spot of trouble due to being convulsed with evil laughter. The wicked badger was exposed as the fraud he was when Janna's Lab nose got a whiff of Papa and she began to wag her tail, a sheepish expression converting her entire golden body into a wriggling apology as she greeted him.

When the badger made his stealthy approach deep in the dark of night, rattling limbs and making a badgery noise, Janna exploded out of the tent, converting instantly from warning to defense, hackles up and eyes blazing as she bayed at the threat to her boy.

roam the place – according to Papa. After a couple of his badger tales, the boys felt the need for protection against such ferocious creatures and set up a survival system. Janna the yellow lab and Libby the heeler were pressed into service as an early warning system which would morph handily into a defense team holding the badger/badgers at bay while the boys escaped. To that end, the dogs slept in the tent with the boys; big boys, big dogs, small tent.

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For our first gathering, all we needed was wood for the fire, and there's plenty of that. John and Loretta and the kids all got into the act at various times, gathering and stacking. John added a bit to the stone fire ring. They tidied up the place. And then, just at dusk on a January evening, we all gathered bearing odds and ends of stuff. Marshmallows, weenies and buns and mustard, a couple of sodas, water, the remnants of chips; whatever we had handy. Lawn chairs pulled up to the fire, we roasted and laughed and dropped stuff into the fire when the sticks burned through and parted with a happy feeling.

I thought perhaps it was a one-time

thing. After all, everybody is busy, and we all intend to do things we enjoy but somehow never seem to get around to. Not so the Fenoglio-Messineo Clan Marshmallow Hot Dog Roast and General Hilarity Evening. It has continued apace, becoming a teeny bit new and improved every time. The fire ring has been rebuilt into a truly elegant fire pit. Metal skewers replaced whittled sticks, which seemed not to last through two marshmallows; those fires are hot. A grate appeared, resurrected from John's shop; Papa fashioned really long skewers from something in his shop. Chili and chopped onions appeared on the menu, condiments for the hot dogs, and at the last fandango, we had homemade ice cream, mixed by Loretta and Sara and churned single-handedly (or so I heard) by John himself. At least for the last 10 minutes, which everyone knows is the hardest part; just ask him.

At the last one also, the question of "outsiders" came up, as grandson two had had a friend over all weekend. "No!" said John firmly. "This is just for us!" "That's right!" echoed Beth. "No outsiders! We wouldn't want to have to kill them." There were nods around the circle. So it seems we are, for that evening, a closed society. Both Italians and Irish are noted for that and so, apparently, is the mix.

We will never settle the woes of mankind; we don't even bring them up. We eat stuff we probably shouldn't and lick our fingers after, stare into the fire and feel drowsy till somebody makes us laugh, worm each other mercilessly, led by John, the expert, and hug each other when the hour gets late and the fire is allowed to burn down and we head for home. Our neighbors are all great people, and so far no one has called the sheriff about that rowdy bunch up in the pasture. Maybe the peacocks drown us out.

Papa and I are so glad for John's suggestion. The kids will remember those nights someday, as will we; our own small place in a big world, our own bright fire in the dark, our own small slice of time. So it was, I like to think, all those millions of years ago; family around the fire.

Grandkids: 'Infinite Diversity in infinite combinations'

If you are or ever have been a Star Trek fan, you know what IDIC is. I'm talking about the old Star Trek, born in the 1960s, eons ago. The one where Captain Kirk and Spock and Bones boldly went, etc. The unlikely, entertaining, politically incorrect version, where larger than life characters tramped about the universe as ambassadors of goodwill, exploring new civilizations and blithely ignoring the Prime Directive whenever it suited them. In other words, being wonderfully, unabashedly human.

IDIC stands for Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, and I believe it's a perfectly fascinating and viable premise in "real life." It would be incredibly boring if we were all stamped from the same mold, without individuality or quirks of our own, moving in lockstep toward some common, identical goal. Such a scenario would doubtless be desirable in the extreme to many segments of society—no dissension, no problems, no adaptations necessary. Just a calm, unquestioning acceptance of whatever dogma was presented, kind of like sheep moving implacably in the direction they're pointed.

Sometimes it seems like things are moving that way in spite of the eccentricities of human nature that make life interesting. But when you are allowed to look at people, to see who they really are, you find the differences that refresh your point of view and give you hope.

In a microcosm consisting of three grandchildren, it's evident every day—endlessly fascinating, revitalizing and frustrating by turns. Grandson One is a pragmatist, a skeptic, calculating his options with as much aplomb as any starship captain ever could. He is mechanically and electronically inclined, interested in the workings of things and how they all come together to run, or fly; or whatever they do. I think he sees how things work in his head in ways I could never imagine. That is the arena in which he is most comfortable; that is what he instinctively grasps and understands. It is logical, it is predictable and it will not suddenly go to pieces on him and assert a will of its own, thereby upsetting his own particular apperception.

Grandson Two is a feeler, an empathizer and a dream-

er: He wants everything to run smoothly and be good, not just for him, but for everyone he knows or comes in contact with. He does everything he can to make that happen, often at his own expense, sublimating his own true wishes to conform with the wishes of others.

He can talk to anybody; friend or stranger; and has an innate skill at making people feel good. Inanimate things are not of much interest to him, though he has certain skills that will stand him in good stead. He loves the farm and the mundane sameness of it; the chores, the tractors, the animals and their behaviors. They are individuals to him and he is learning how to deal with their idiosyncratic personalities without taking it personally.

The boys were born one day apart. They share the same

genes on one side, at least; they have been raised together. When they were babies, they had a "twin" language that only they understood. Now that they are growing up, their natural paths have diverged and they might as well speak different languages, so difficult it sometimes is for them to come to agreement.

Then there is Sara. She is from a different culture, one where women seem to be of little value and often repressed. She is irrepressible, full of joy and temper; the fire of life so bright it dazzles. Her mother remarks that she is not a "girly" girl, to which I say hurrah! She is far too busy to worry about frills and body image; she is using her wits and her limbs and her spirit to move her world in the direction she wants it to go.

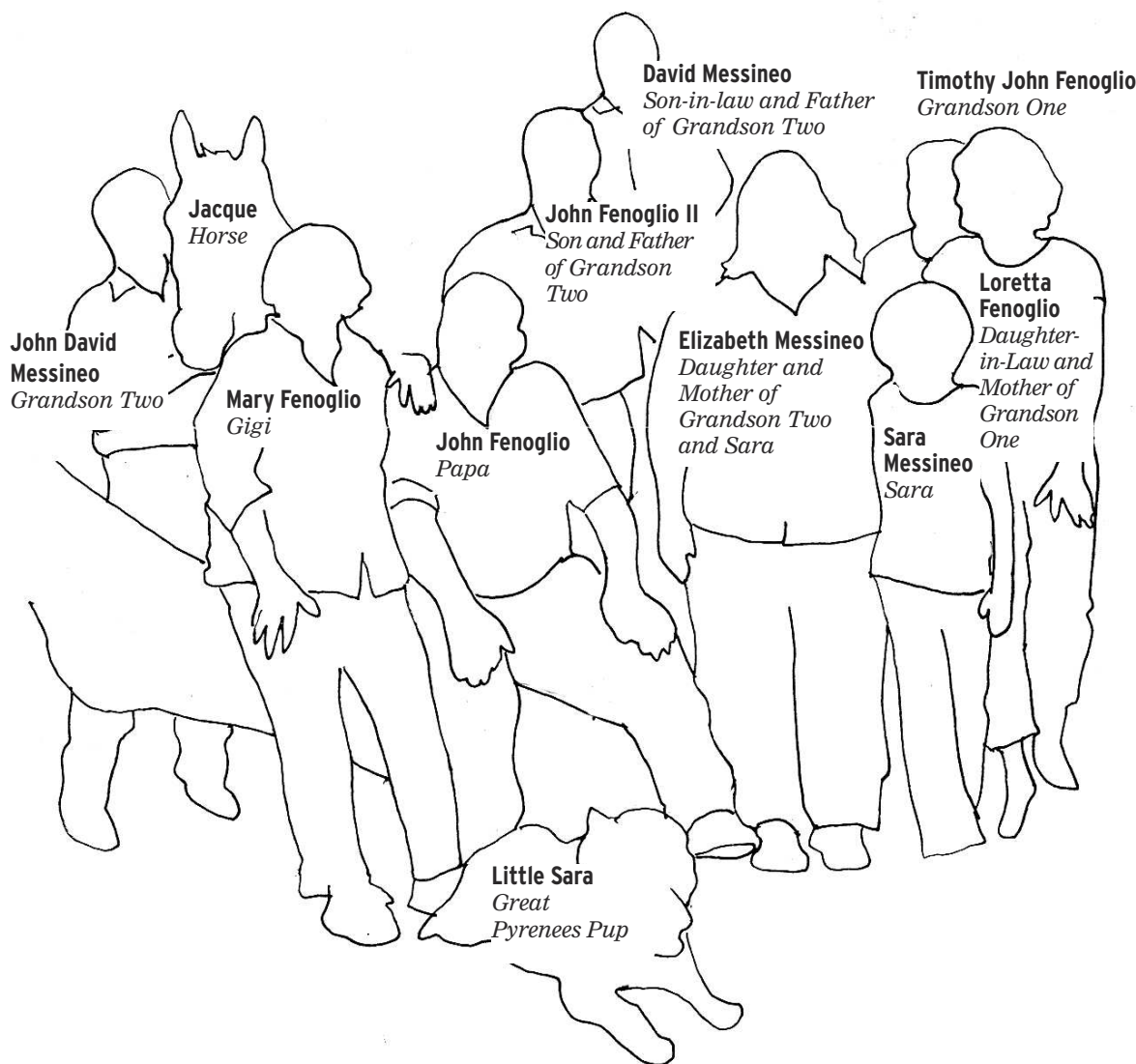
She never chooses books about princesses and beauty queens. Her latest choice is a very good study of reptiles and insects. Not for nothing is her nickname "Ladybug." Digging in the garden is a favorite pastime; playgrounds are her delight. Tagging Papa about as he gets hay or moves cows or goes to the sale suits her as much as it ever did the boys. She has great friends at the barn, and birth and death are no strangers to her, young as she is.

A day or so ago, she was crawling through the fence to join me

when Papa came down the drive with a young bull snake coiled around his arm. Maybe two feet long or so, it was just a baby. She was a bit wary; but excited at the prospect of holding it; Papa showed her how to grasp it behind the head and by the body. She clutched a bit when its tail coiled around her arm, but Papa explained what it was doing and she relaxed. Her face glowed with pride and her dark eyes sparkled as her mom took pictures.

"I think those boys are afraid of snakes," she announced, one up in the ceaseless competition, "but I'm not."

Together they took the little fellow up to the hay barn, and she explained to me later how he slid off under the hay to catch a mouse. Talk about your show-and-tell!





Time is a river, ebb and flow but never still

About this time of year, for some reason, I'm struck by the passage of time. It's a bittersweet revelation, every time it hits me, and the smallest things trigger it. Sara rushes up to me to give me a hug after not seeing me for a while, and I suddenly notice that her head comes well above my shoulder now and she is a willowy, long-legged young girl on her way to being grown. Grandson One is out and about with his very pretty friend Chloe and when he sees us he comes to say hello, bending down to look in the car, tall and lanky with a charismatic grin. Grandson Two plays in his last band concert, strong and handsome in his dressy black pants and shirt, blonde hair shining under the lights onstage. The boys will soon be 18, seniors next year, moving out into their lives.

Where did it go, the long afternoons of sandbox play, peanut butter sandwiches on the patio, naps and drowsy wakings in my lap? The way is littered with rowdy adventures, skins and scrapes, fevers and tummy aches, voices laughing and singing, arguing and discussing, yelling and whispering, sticky hands and a million sticky kisses I wouldn't trade for anything, then or now. Sometimes I see, in the grownup but unfinished faces, the little ones I knew so well and even though I'm proud and happy with the way they're turning out, I miss them.

It's a tradeoff—wiping noses, washing hands, trips to the playground segue into calling (or texting) and saying, "I've got a problem with my computer and I need your help," or "Papa's going to haul some cattle and if you've got time he could sure use your help." Different. Not better, not worse, just definitely different. It takes getting used to.

Time is a river, ebb and flow, never standing still. That, too, is a mixed blessing. Everybody's life has bad patches we don't want to linger in and live through one minute longer than necessary. Funny, those often seem to last the longest; it's the sweetest moments that are the most fleeting. The trick is to recognize those sweet times, to be able to really be in the moment and relish it. That's harder than it sounds, distractions abound, and before you know it, the moment is past and you're left with the memory.



ANDY SHARP

The ongoing drought is impacting wildlife, including the San Gabriel River, as seen at San Gabriel Park on Friday, August 12, 2022.

It seems we are too often anticipating the future rather than enjoying the now, for whatever the reason. In the barn, when new babies come, immediately we begin to assess whether they might be all we hoped they would when we made the choice in breeding season. It's easy to lose the awe and wonder of small life starting, wet and shaky but eager to nurse and grow stronger, in the practical considerations that arise. The kid is a buck, and we've never had a doeling from this particular doe, who is getting older, and we really wanted one. The fact that he's as gorgeous as all of her kids have been, as well as strong and healthy, initially gets overlooked, and then we get a grip.

How much better to celebrate him for who he is, at least for now, just as his mother is doing. She's tired from labor, hungry and thirsty, but proud as all get out of her new little son. She talks to him, lifts her leg and nudges him back towards her udder, washes him with roughly gentle strokes of her tongue, making him wobble and totter under her caress. In four months he will be weaning, and in six she will be on to the next chapter in her life and so will he. But here and now, she's content, flooded

with hormones, bedded deep in clean hay, safe and happy. How often do we humans take advantage of that ripple in the river of time, a little quiet backwater if you will, that suspension of striving to achieve, just to be who we are right that second?

Animals live that way instinctively, intuitively, and thrive on it. There are rules and order in their world, just as in ours, but more straightforward and easier to comply with. The consequences of non-compliance are immediate and predictable, delineated from birth and communicated with unmistakable signals to the would-be transgressor. There is no ambivalence about the punishment, and it can be harsh, but once effected, it's over. The moment is past and everyone moves on, no grudges and no regrets.

Humans are far more complex and their society more complicated, of course. Different. Not better, not worse, just definitely different. In the business world, it's always the next deal that matters, the goal always just past our grasp. In education, it's no longer learning for the love of learning, creating and satisfying a boundless curiosity about our marvelous universe and its fascinating inhabitants. The goal now is passing the

standardized tests and learning the rote lessons that are supposed to make everybody equal in their future life. In our daily lives, of practical necessity, we must focus on making it – whatever "it" is for us – and we get caught up in doing what we must to achieve that goal.

Yet sometimes, with the warm, fragrant weight of a sleeping child in our arms, breathing in sync and wondering what dreams dance behind the closed lids and fluttering lashes, we get a glimpse of forever and we want that moment never to end. There are unexpected moments when the sky is a certain color and the air has a feel to it you can't express but remember somewhere deep inside, when your world balances on the cusp of perfect and you can almost see what it's all about and where it's all going. You're floating on that river of time, just where you should be, and it's magic.

When it happens, don't grab on. It doesn't work that way. Don't even think. Just relax into it, no questions, and be immersed in whatever it is.

I hear you saying, "What? How Zen!" Exactly.

When summertime was endless and happiness was forever

Summertime is traditionally vacation time for most folks; school is out and kids are free of schedule and routine. A whole world of fun beckons them, most of which bears the admonition “children must be accompanied by an adult.” Even if the written designation doesn’t apply, the unspoken need is there. It simply isn’t smart to let kids go to movies or swimming or to lots of other activities without adult supervision.

When I was a kid, long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away, things were different. We rode our bikes like the wind through that small North Texas town, spent afternoons at the park or the library, trudged around in the open fields that rimmed the town tracking down horses or just exploring, lay on hot sidewalks under shade trees and fed cracker crumbs to long lines of ants just to see them troop up and down in organized labor; flushed crickets out of holes with a water hose and in general amused ourselves. There was a vacant lot full of nothing but dirt where we graded out roads for cars and dug garages into sandbanks. I had toy horses that needed barns built and stick corrals constructed. We dug a clubhouse into a sandbank one summer and furnished it lavishly with junk we dragged up from our basements and garages. Eventually someone called one of us home to supper and we all drifted away to eat and then play a little longer under the streetlight on the corner before going in to a bath and cool sheets with a little fan humming in the window and the sounds of the summer night drifting across us as we fell into quiet sleep.

At least, that’s how I remember it. Hot, sun-blushed days, long afternoons of play and evenings with the grownups on the porches, hidden by darkness, the sound of their voices rising and falling in a comfortable rhythm with the squeak of rockers and swings. There was the sweet scent of the wisteria vine hanging thick in the heavy summer air mixed with honeysuckle and freshly mown grass and the smell of wet earth from the flowerbeds where the hose gurgled out warm water to brace plants for the next day’s onslaught of heat. We caught fireflies in jars and set them on the porch where we lay watching them blink in their glass prison while we stretched out on concrete still warm from the day or painted boards rough under our cheeks, listening to the grownups, only half understanding their conversations but lulled by the sound of their voices. We hated it when the evening ended, the fireflies flew free and we were hustled in to bed.

Sometimes we made ice cream in a tall wooden White Mountain freezer, starting it well before supper was ready so that it could be packed down to ripen. Whatever kids were handy piled into my Dad’s convertible, top down, no seat belts, and rode to the ice house where the man at the loading dock gave us all a big double handful of hard-packed frost, just like a huge snowball in the middle of summer. We ate on them all the way home, dripping and squealing when somebody forced a frozen piece down the back of somebody else’s shirt. Up front with my Dad rode



The sun sets along County Road 446 in East Williamson County on Monday, August 15, 2022.

two huge brown paper bags of gleaming, crystal clear ice for tea at supper and the ice cream freezer. Once home, my grandma brought the milky ice cream mix to the porch and filled the tinned freezer can, my Dad put the freezer together and we kids began filling the gap between can and wooden sides with handfuls of ice. Every once in awhile he would add rock salt from a Morton’s box, and we’d put some on a chunk of ice, where it stuck, and lick it off.

“You’re going to thin out your blood if you keep eating that salt like that,” my Granma would scold. She said that about pickle juice and lemons dusted with salt, too, and now the doctor tells me to take an aspirin a day to thin my blood. I’d much rather have that ice coated with rock salt on that old front porch.

The freezer handle had to be turned and the kids had to start it. It quickly became too stiff for small arms and my Dad or Grandad took it over. We kids took turns sitting on the top of the freezer on a thick padding of newspaper. Once frozen it was packed with ice, a final dash of salt, and covered with an old quilt kept specially for that purpose and left to ripen while we ate supper. Later in the evening we repaired to the porch with bowls and spoons at

the ready as the freezer was ceremoniously uncovered and the rich, smooth ice cream dropped off the big old spoon in creamy blobs, rounding up in the bowl. Retiring to our favorite corners, we could take about two bites before our heads felt as if they would explode and we had to slow down. There is no ice cream in a supermarket freezer that can begin to touch that incredibly smooth, milky vanilla perfection of my childhood.

There was so much more to the summer; thunderstorms, trips to the lake, sometimes even a week’s vacation to some exotic spot like Colorado. And through it all wound the wonderful sense that the world was ours, time was endless, and that happiness would last forever.

Grandsons One and Two and Sara like to hear those stories. “What happened next?” Sara will demand after the third telling of the same simple tale. I don’t tell her how things have changed, how different her life is from the life I knew, how much more hurried and chaotic and dangerous it feels to me for little ones now.

I just hug her and say, “What happened next is, I grew up”.

Gratitude carries us through the rough spots

We are all a product of our past, comprised of happy times and euphoric moments, grim revelations and depths of despair. All that baggage we drag along with us, whether we acknowledge its weight or not, takes time to accrue. That's why those of us with lots of miles behind us are often more complicated, sometimes more grumpy and usually tending toward the pessimistic.

At the same time, we can also be far more appreciative of the simpler things in life and have a bit more patience. For example, many of the younger folks get aggravated when the weather forecasters predict rain on the weekend—soccer games will be soggy, golf games washed out, picnics and biking, boating and all the other recreational activities will have to go on hold. Their plans are spoiled, their weekend shot, and they are displeased.

But some of us are happy with rainy weekends, relishing the smell of rain on the parched earth and the satisfying thought that now a small bowl in a rock in the woods holds a drink for our small wild friends. The golf course, the lake, the bike trail all will be there for another weekend.

Perhaps the major attribute that seems to develop with a bit of weathering is gratitude. There are all sorts and degrees of gratitude. The easy, instant, “thank you” kind, given for a favor or a pleasantry and soon forgotten. There's the deeper, heartfelt “what would I have done without you,” kind in response to a helping hand when you're really in trouble. Then there's the gut-wrenching, saved-my-life kind that many of us never experience. When you do, you know it.

The most difficult kind is the everyday; intangible, indescribable feeling of being grateful for life itself. This one takes practice to perfect.

It's easy to be grateful when life sings along in harmony with you, but when the notes go sour and things get tough, it gets harder to say “*I'm grateful*” for just about anything. You have to stop, back out of the black “*why me?*” mood that shrouds you, and consciously says, “*I'm lucky.*” There's always something to feel lucky about, even if it's just that you're still around to feel anything at all.

I think it's easier to do when you have miles unwound behind you.

Early on Thursday morning I had one of those reminders that sends ice water through your veins. Screaming sirens streaking out on the main road wakened me. I hate sirens for many reasons, not the least of which is that they always mean disaster for somebody. True, sirens announce that help is coming, but the need for that help means someone is in terrible trouble.



When I stepped outside to look around, there was a column of thick, black smoke smudging the sky toward Andice. Instantly I went back to the night our house was in flames, pouring out choking black smoke and blasting the trees with incredible heat. Papa was in Houston on business and I had fallen asleep downstairs, watching TV. Our Border Collie, Holly, woke first me and then, bounding up stairs that were blazing, roused the children.

It's easy to be grateful when life sings along in harmony with you, but when the notes go sour and things get tough, it gets harder to say “*I'm grateful*” for just about anything.

If not for her, the smoke would have killed us as we slept. As it was, we had only minutes to escape. The kids had to come out a second floor window, and though they tried to throw her out first, Holly was too frightened by the smoke and roaring of the fire. She ran down the hall, crawled under our bed, and died there. We all carry that grief — and that gratitude — forever.

The smoke was indeed someone's home, evoking terrible memories, instant empathy for their ordeal and, honestly, the guilty gratitude that it wasn't mine.

Admittedly, sometimes it seems that there is less and less to be grateful for. You hit a bad patch in your personal life and everything seems to go awry, no matter what you do. Someone you love is ill, a job you

counted on dissolves, someone you trusted betrays you, all things you can't control. Politicians show their true colors and it's pretty disgusting, big business once again demonstrates that the only consideration is their bottom line and the heck with the public, some demented man executes a roomful of little girls and we learn that was actually the best part of his plan for them. What is there to be grateful for in any of that?

Maybe just this; you're still here. You're still kicking. Maybe there will be something you can do about all of those things, maybe none of them, but you have the chance to try. We're all in the same boat and we just have to bail like crazy sometimes. Things will come right in the end, even if it doesn't happen the way we wanted. It may be that being consciously grateful for small things will help us to hang on.

The Disparity of Individuals who meet and mate up

When the temperature gets into the triple digits I get edgy. Things that normally aren't even a blip on my radar assume monumental significance and may evoke a snarly response rather than the happily good-natured attitude I'm famous for. (This statement may be contested in certain circles, but we won't linger over that.) I tend to become lethargic and semi-comatose at the drop of a few degrees on the thermometer and can be intensely irritated by energetic activity in my vicinity. The Pushfaces and I can, if undisturbed, veg out during the afternoon sizzle without guilt or remorse, emerging in the evening to resume what passes for life in the summertime.

Papa, meanwhile, is blowing and going just like always, tossing little asides in our direction as he passes. "Have you done this or that?" "Are you taking a nap?" (We were, until he appeared.) "Have you see that whichamawidget I left on the kitchen table three months ago and absolutely must have right now?" and my personal favorite, "Do you have something planned for lunch, or am I on my own?" You can see the wealth of responses available here, most of which I am either too sluggish or too smart to employ.

Which brings me to my latest deep and studious contemplation: the disparity of individuals who meet and mate up. It seems that morning people always marry night people. How is that supposed to work? The a.m. person is up and singing with the birds at sunrise, unable to lie still a moment longer. The p.m. person, having watched the late, late, late show and a couple of movies after that, while awake because of the cheerful chirping of the a.m. person, is not happy about it. The a.m. person inevitably will try to initiate conversation if the slugabed so much as cracks an eyelid, asking weighty questions like, "Are we having breakfast?" or "What did you think about the last presidential election?" The p.m. person couldn't care less if he/she took lessons, which always seems to come as a shocking discovery to the questioner. You and I both know this can't, after 50 years or so, be true.

There is always the thermostat battle, which rages afresh with the change of seasons. One turns it up, the other, upon pass-



Horses graze in a field along County Road 432 near Noack on Monday, August 8, 2022.

ANDY SHARP

ing, turns it back down. One is always just a bit chilly and the other is disrobing while issuing dramatic declarations of "burning up." This works in reverse in cold weather; one is in sweats while the other relaxes in shorts and short sleeves. One lobbies for a fire in the fireplace at least a month before the other feels called upon to agree. When the outside temps are in the 30s, wide-open windows and doors are summarily slammed shut by the cold-natured partner, only to be reopened by the hot-natured one.

And then there's food. One likes it hot; to qualify for the seal of approval, sweat must bead the brow and tears be shed. The other side of that coin is the partner for whom salsa labeled "mild" is often too fiery for comfort. One can crunch raw jalapeños with gusto. The other can barely bear to watch. The pepper-belly adds Louisiana hot sauce to everything from spaghetti to mashed potatoes to ham sandwiches. The consort finds pepperoni on pizza a bit spicy for good taste. One never met a burger he/she didn't like. The other is a captain in the Food Police and would die before eating a French fry.

One likes talk radio exclusively. The other wants only music. One watches blood and gore mystery detective shows on TV. The other goes for sitcoms. Gritty realism enthalls one. The other cringes and retires with a good book.

The ultimate disparity in this realm is, of

course, the die-hard sports fan, who watches/listens to anything remotely resembling a competitive game at any hour of any day. The mate to this obsessive sports fan dives for the door after a couple of hours and returns only after all semblance of sports casting has subsided.

There are exceptions, of course. Arguably the happiest combinations are shared enthusiasms, like the spandex crowd, all biking like mad in their helmets and gear. "The couple that sweats together..." or something like that. I've seen motorcycle couples that obviously love what they're doing, whether it's on one bike or two. Horse people who share a passion for the care and riding of horses have a great time trailering and showing, brushing and grooming, just in general doing all things horse. Admittedly, very often it's the female who is horse-obsessed and her partner who is along for the ride, no pun intended, but it seems to work.

All of these pairings, and many others too numerous to mention, would seem to be aberrations, totally unworkable in the real world, but they do work. The old saw about "opposites attract" seems to have some foundation in fact. One of the greatest gentlemen (in the true sense of the word) we ever knew was a rough and tumble horseman from his toddler days. He had lived more in his life than any 50 men I ever came across, and was a horse whisperer long be-

fore that became a franchise business in this country. They aren't making any more like him, and we are all the poorer for it. His wife, whom he met in Madison Square Garden at a rodeo, was a refined, well-educated librarian at a big university in Texas until her retirement. She had a grand piano, and played it well. He sat down beside her at the Garden, puffing on his big cigar, and said, "Do you mind if I smoke?" She gave him a long, level look and replied, "Yes." I don't know whether he put out the cigar, but I'm guessing not. The marriage lasted until his death, well into his eighties.

It recently came to my attention that a singular relationship has formed in a pasture on a ranch owned by some acquaintances. On this ranch dwells an elderly cow, retired now for years. She has the company of other cows, but has struck up an unlikely friendship with a small, feral pig. They hang together happily near a pond, and when people approach and the pig takes off, the cow goes bawling after it. Left to themselves, they spend hot afternoons under a shade tree or standing in the pond together. There is actual pictorial verification of this.

Soul mates from a past life, reunited? "I'm so glad to see you but, darling, how you've changed! Still, I'd know you anywhere!"

Something to think about during the siesta hours.

Mischief stirs in the silver light of the moon

Sometimes, in the hustle of getting through one day and on to the next, I forget how connected people once were to the subtle, powerful effects of the natural world. That world is disappearing for many of us; the clamor of contemporary life drowns out the quieter rhythms we once lived by. It pushes hard against those of us who still aspire to a quieter, less harried existence and makes it difficult to achieve. Once in awhile I get reminded that fast isn't always good, schedules are not always to be kept and the flow of things is something far different than man has made it out to be.

Last Sunday night was the night of the full moon. Out here on the farm we are perhaps a bit more aware of the phases of the moon because we have an unobstructed view of its rising and setting. Moonbright nights are vastly different from the pitch black of dark of the moon nights. Animals respond accordingly, and since we are acutely aware of animal behavior, we are also aware of the differences.

It happened that I was sitting outside when the moon rose last Sunday. I had just finished cleaning nest boxes and filling them with fresh hay, and sat down to listen to the end of the day for a minute before moving on to the next evening chore. My cell phone was safely in the house, the pushfaces were lined up at the window watching me but unable to reach me, the outside cats were somewhere else and I had the chair all to myself. The sun had dropped out of sight, though the western sky was still bright, (which I can see now that the big tree is gone), and behind me I could hear the bedding down talk from the hen house. Peace, for a moment.

The ridge across the valley had grown dark. I could see that annoying little red light blinking just above the horizon. It didn't used to be there, like so many blinking, winking red and white lights I can see now, and I try to ignore it, but in the dark it draws the eye as I suppose it is designed to do. Suddenly it was blinking, not on the dark rim of the ridge, but square in the center of an orange slice sliding up over the crest of the hill. Fascinated, I watched as the butterscotch orb slipped swiftly and silently into the sky, swallowing the red light and then rising to clear it so that it winked



A Waxing Gibbous moon, 97.1% visibility, shines over grain elevators along F.M. 1466 September 8, 2022.

ANDY SHARP

below the round, golden ball.

Dark, rich gold in the beginning of its ascent, the moon turned quickly into a butter yellow circle and then towards pale yellow and finally silvery as it surely and steadily climbed the sky. It became entangled in the branches of trees in the yard. Their limbs made a lacy pattern across its silver face. Several guinea fowl gone to roost adorned the branches and stood out in bold relief, black silhouettes like paper cutouts, their soft chuckles underlining the chickens babble. A little cool breeze lifted across me and I thought how right the world felt just then, everything in balance even if just for

a breath. The world turned silvery under the wash of the early moon, and I got up to finish chores.

Later on, when bedtime approached, it was a different story. Walking outside with the dogs, the night world felt unsettled. That same little wind moved through the branches of the trees, but now it whispered of things afoot, restless in the shadows. The dogs walked out and stood noses up, sniffing the air. I wondered what their noses told them; things I couldn't fathom, I'm sure. They hustled out to the gate and stood looking through it. The goats had bedded down uneasily, getting up and changing

positions, going to the hay rack and lying back down somewhere else. The geese sleep up at the hay barn, curled down into the hay under the security light, big white bodies clearly visible like stones scattered randomly across the ground. At least half of them were standing up, moving around. I heard them talking softly among themselves. Little Sara, the Pyr, stood pressed against my side, head up, eyes bright, listening to things I couldn't hear. The cows were bedded out by the compost pile, some of them lying down but others standing.

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Over it all, the bright moon presided like the queen of the night she is, unblinking and majestic, illuminating much that night usually conceals. I was glad to call the little dogs inside and get everyone settled.

Except nobody settled. Sara began to bark, and then the others took it up. Evelyn's raspy voice began it, followed by Skye's shrill, insistent carp and Riggs' deeper, hoarser chop. Tuck doesn't bark much, but he chimed in here and there. The pushfaces, far from being ready to get un-

der the covers, roamed restlessly through the house, standing at the back door and adding to the general din. Papa demanded quiet from them and everybody shut up, but only temporarily. Even Milo and the other cats sat in the windows, staring outside as if expecting something to happen and not wanting to miss it.

The pushfaces gave up, finally, and the big hairy cowards trailed off, but Sara kept at it. Her voice is deep and commanding, as befits a dog of her size and breeding, and has many inflections. We are familiar with all of them, and generally know when to pay attention and when she's just annoyed

by something. On this moonstruck night her voice held a quality hard to determine but impossible to ignore. At one point Papa stepped outside and when he came back in he said a coyote was singing very close; they don't come up on the hill very often, preferring the valley and the creek or distant pastures. I went out and found the air still, without a ripple of artificial noise like traffic on the highway.

Still, and alive with sound, every dog for miles around was talking. The heeler at Grandson Two's house was chopping the night into little pieces with her distinctive bark. At Grandson One's house I could hear

Bud and Bonnie answering; the basset up the way added her basso notes and over it all Sara provided the harmony. Because I was up, the pushfaces were standing at the door adding small comments. I knew that the pastures were alive with small creatures going about their business under the moon's spotlight, more vulnerable because of it. Sleep seemed ridiculously unattainable in the face of all that unrest and sunrise far away.

Stands to reason, if the moon can pull the oceans around like gigantic blankets on her own timetable, she can make a few hours wakeful for mere mortal beings.

Summer, a season apart from all others

Summer has a taste on the tongue, a feel on the skin, a mellow flush all over that leads to lassitude. Fall sharpens the senses, invigorates the mind. Winter wraps the body in layers of protection against the raw wind and wet skies, and there is a darkening of the heart that can happen sometimes. Spring is an awakening of all things that grow and change.

But summer, though a season in the natural progression, is apart from all the others.

Summer wears flowers in its hair and ladybugs on its clothes. It hums and buzzes and drowns through long afternoons of heat that shimmer the ripening hay fields and turn tomatoes red as blood among their dark green leaves. The rich air is heavy with heady draughts of honeysuckle, weighted with scents from a hundred plants one never sees, thick with humidity that makes a body slow its pace, like it or not. Sweet though it can be, summer in Texas is not for the faint of heart.

Morning comes hazy, sunlight muted through rising mist from the valley. Standing outside with a cup of coffee, looking down the valley where the vapor is coming off the creek, I know it's as cool as it will be all day.

Wherever the sun strikes, its heat portends the day to follow, and whatever work can be done early, so much the better. It's the best garden time, before the day sucks the juice right out of both plants and garden-

er. Barn chores are easier before the barns get hot and airless. Always the smart ones, animals go out to graze and they work at it earnestly, filling up after the night's sleep. The sun climbs quickly, haze burned away, the day beginning to simmer.

Afternoons are long, not measured in hours but in increments of heat. By mid-afternoon the cattle are all lying down

**Summer afternoons are long,
not measured in hours but in
increments of heat.**

somewhere under the trees. Somehow they know where the best place to catch a breeze will be that given day and they gather there, calves lying together and cows spaced around them, cuddling comfortably through the hottest hours.

The horses stand drowsing, one hind foot cocked, tails swishing, making a pass now and again at an irritating fly. Although their eyes are almost closed and they appear to rest, their ears are alive, always listening to a world they never fully trust to be benign. Sweat is dried on their backs.

If you're out and about, there isn't much to see. Small things are hunkered down,

waiting for the heat to pass. Sometimes a snake will be stretched out basking in the sun, so lethargic from the heat it will scarcely notice you until you're right up close. If you press it, the long, sleek body will move silently into the nearest cover and disappear; a haughty glance lingering behind. Once in awhile you will jump a rabbit, especially if you have a dog along, and it will leap away, veering right and left as if demented and coming to rest not so far away from where you startled it, eyes wide and frantic, ears standing straight up. In midsummer, the dog will probably look at the rabbit and then at you, tongue lolling, plainly saying it just isn't worth the effort.

People are out, of course. Tractors are weaving their regular patterns across the hay fields, leaving great swaths of hay lying in windrows behind the cutters. Some tractors have air-conditioned cabs now, with radios to pass the long, hot hours alone.

Many do not, spotting only a canopy to keep off the worst of the sun. Papa's tractor is one of those; he wears a big hat and carries a thermos of water. He also sees and hears things he never would in one of the air-conditioned cabs. It's a tradeoff.

When Papa was plowing up his oats to plant haygrazer, he became aware that a big female red-tailed hawk was watching him. She sat on an upturned clod at the edge of the field just where he made his turn and kept her yellow eyes fixed on him, turning slowly on the clod as he passed and watch-

ing as he made the journey up the field and back down to where she sat. He made about 10 rounds like that, thinking she might be watching for field mice in the freshly turned earth, but she never made a move to hunt. She just sat watching him.

Suddenly, as he made his approach, she leaped from the clod, great wings beating the heavy air, and was aloft. She circled him a few times and then was gone. He said it was as if she was curious about what he was doing, and when she had satisfied her curiosity, she went on about her business.

She was one of the perks of the open-air tractor.

After the long, hot day, evening finally comes and things perk up. Cattle get up and begin to graze, the horses come up for feed and to get a drink. Even the goats get out into the front pasture for an hour's munching. Sitting in the swing, looking down the valley, everything feels just right.

Another hot day behind us, perhaps a little breeze or the rumbling promise of a shower refreshing us, we watch the evening come down. The trio of tiny screech owls lines up on the fence to wait their turn at the birdbath where they drink, their little button eyes gleaming in the dusk. The honeysuckle down on the fence sends waves of sweetness across the pasture right into our faces as we settle tired bodies toward the night.

Sometimes, even in Texas in the summer, you just want to live forever.

It is different, to be sure, but it's no less dear

Thanksgiving has always been a pretty big deal around our house. Long years ago the table groaned with dishes brought by aunts, family friends and whoever else had been invited. The women donned aprons and gathered in the kitchen to assemble Thanksgiving dinner, and they pulled out all the stops. My brother and I and five boy cousins saw china and silverware not brought into the light of day since the last Christmas feast, and unfolded snowy cloth napkins to put in our laps as instructed. The kids' table was Spartan, not that we cared, but the grownups' table sparkled and shone with crystal and proper place settings of silver. The heady fragrance of dinner rolls brought in hot from the oven was almost intoxicating and for once we could slather on all the butter we wanted, watching the golden rivulets slide down the crusty sides of the bread.

Bowls of mashed potatoes so fluffy they floated onto the plate, giblet gravy as smooth as silk, bright green broccoli, green beans from the garden, cooked all day with a ham hock, steamed asparagus, sweet potato pie, my granma's cornbread dressing that exploded in the mouth with sage and seasonings in every delicious bite, and of course the turkey and ham done to a juicy turn; all graced our table.

My mother loved little dishes of things; green onions, tiny dill pickles, sweet bread and butter chips, black olives and little pickled onions sat in pretty dishes scattered among the larger serving bowls. We kids, safe at our own table, stuck the black olives on our fingers and waggled them at one another, plucking them off one by one until some adult noticed our giggling and put a stop to the shenanigans.

We knew there was pie, pumpkin and pecan, chocolate and lemon meringue. The smell of them baking the day before had driven us wild with anticipation, remembering the taste of our favorite from the year before, topped off with real whipped cream. By the time we were done with the turkey and trimmings, though our taste buds were clamoring for dessert, our stomachs were far too full to indulge. Football on television, happily, was still far in the future, so the men lounged about in the living room, talking and smoking, drowsy with food. The women gathered again in the kitchen and we heard the comfortable sound of their voices, laughing and chatting as they put the food away for suppertime and carefully hand washed and dried all the pretty glassware and china. If we didn't get outside in time, we were pressed into helping to clear the table, so we disappeared as quickly as possible into the big yard.

Some years it was cold, but usually it was just jacket weather and we were used to being outside anyway. We passed the time squabbling amiably over whose turn it was on the big swing hanging in the huge elm, playing with whatever dog was available, or just sitting on the concrete side porch, sleepy as a batch of puppies with full bellies. As the afternoon wore on we digested all that turkey and



A baby donkey stays close to its mama in a Beyersville pasture on Friday, May 20, 2022.

dressing and livened up. Sometimes we rode bikes or raced each other up and down the sidewalk from one end of the block to the other, and sometimes a grownup, usually a dad or an uncle, tired of being housebound, took us for a car ride in the brown November countryside, but the afternoon always ended with more food eaten from the regular Blue Willow dishes, followed by pie and coffee. Though we kids didn't get coffee, the smell of it brewing was heady enough.

After a little more conversation, dishes were gathered, jackets were fetched from the bedroom, small people who had fallen asleep were hoisted onto shoulders and good-byes were said. We stood in the yard, watching the lights disappear down the road, reluctant to let go of the day. My Granma must have been tired, but I never thought of that as I leaned against her, enveloped in the warm circle of her arm and the comfortable, familiar scent of her. She would give me a squeeze and say, "All right, Sister, let's go in". And we would.

They are gone now, all those women of my childhood, living only in my memories of them. Gone, too, the men that smelled of tobacco and something I learned much

later was brandy, with their deep, rumbling voices talking about things I didn't understand. All but two of the boy cousins are gone, and my brother. No one is left to remember with me those golden holiday gatherings when we saw our world in a haze of wonder, our lives stretching out before us like an endless ribbon of highway, waiting for our footsteps to make our mark.

There have been many holiday celebrations since those early ones, but Thanksgiving is still a pretty big deal at our house. It's different, to be sure, but no less dear to me. There was the year recently when, tired out from the frenzied pace of things, one member suggested we just make enchiladas or chili and call it good. (We didn't.) But we do use paper plates with a Thanksgiving motif to cut down on the cleanup; there are only three women and Sara now in the kitchen. Grandson One's dad usually fries the turkey, but the giblet gravy is my Granma's recipe, and so is the dressing. It feels good to have some things just the same, but it doesn't really matter as long as we're together.

We're a long way from being perfect, but we're all we've got, and we wish you a happy Thanksgiving.

Cold snap ushers in winter reflections

It's been a long time since we needed barn coats and muck boots; at least a couple of years. The need arose in earnest these past few days and caught us unprepared. It's not like we weren't warned about the coming cold snap; that's all the weatherpersons were talking about for days on end. They are easily excited by the slightest hint of anything out of the ordinary, though, so I confess we may not have taken them as seriously as perhaps we should have. There's always a lot of competition for our attention by various and sundry, and we tend to prioritize. This time we put "weather" too low on the list by a notch or two.

I'm not sure what got my attention first, the cold rain accompanied by thunder and lightning or the bite of the north wind when I rounded the corner of the barn. It's been a while since the wind took my breath like that, and I turned my back to it to think things over. Questions arose like, why didn't I get my hooded sweatshirt before I left the house, were my boots, sitting unused on the back porch for many months, now home to all manner of creepy crawlies, and where did I last have my good warm gloves? The final question in my mind was how fast I could get the chore done I had come out to do.

That chore was feeding horses. Said horses had put themselves in their stalls out of the wind and poked their noses out when they heard me coming. Jacque, the senior gelding, had already rolled and was liberally coated with mud. He and Trooper drop and roll if the sun goes behind a cloud. Kiss, the only mare, seldom rolls at all, but Challenger, the little Arab, will when the notion takes him. I scooped out their feed and lugged about twice as much good hay to them as usual, figuring they needed it to stoke their inner fires. The Arab was shaking, and few things are as alarming to me as seeing a horse shaking from cold. Trooper is in another pasture, but I knew he was



Ice formed on trees and monuments at Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery and Prayer Gardens on Thursday, February 11, 2021. Williamson County residents awakened to icy conditions, ushering in extremely-cold temperatures for the next few days.

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probably shaking, too.

There is always that one small hitch in an otherwise smooth running machine that binds the cog – or something – so that things don't work like they should. With the horses, it's Trooper, a big flea-bitten grey gelding. He fights other geldings, so he lives with Papa's cows. He refuses to be stalled, so he's out in the weather. He's never been blanketed, and the time to try it out is not when it's almost dark, a cold rain is blowing sideways against you and the temperature is dropping like a stone thrown into the lake. Trooper does get fed well, but he's on his own after that, and while it causes me anxiety, he prefers it that way.

Back in the relative warmth of the house, I checked the weather channel. Good night nurse! We were in for not only a cold spell, but an extended cold spell. A couple of days and nights, that's not uncommon; the weatherpersons were talking a week of rain and bitter cold. In mid-November, yet! Something at the top of the world had turned loose and let fly, and we definitely were not ready for that. Wood needed to be stacked on the porch to keep it dry, since we heat the house mainly with the fireplace. Better check the pipes and faucets, get out the heated buckets for the goats and horses, be sure there was feed and hay in the right places in case it rained enough to be too muddy to get the tractor to the hay yard, get

the plants stowed in the greenhouse – the list expanded by the minute.

In the odd moment, I had visions of cold, cloudy days in which I would do some baking, clean up paperwork languishing on the desk, address Christmas cards, make a comprehensive list for shopping, make chili and soup and casseroles so the house would be warm and fragrant. Hot coffee, hot tea – hot dog!

Barn gear and muck boots were not the only things I had forgotten about. Sitting by the fire with a cuppa something, feet toasting pleasantly, only works when there's wood available and the fire is fed. Often. Errands still have to be run, and carrying groceries in through wet, windy cold is even less pleasant than dragging them in under normal conditions. The hay in the Border collies' houses should be changed every day when it's rainy; they get it wet and muddy going in and out. I cook for the dogs when it's this cold, so they have a warm dinner. Grandson Two blanketed the horses, but they still needed to be fed every morning and that's where the north wind has the most bite, coming upslope with few trees to block it.

Papa's cows sheltered in the trees and stood tail-to the wind, coming for cubes in the early evening and visiting the round bales intermittently. They stood hunched with heads down during the downpours,

shaking like great red dogs when the rain ended. The goats stayed in the barn, venturing out for a bite of hay when it wasn't raining, picking their way through the cloying mud like walking on hot coals. When the rain ended they hurried through the trees, grabbing up fallen leaves and leftover acorns before beating it back to lie cuddling in the barn out of the wind. Only the birds seemed unperturbed by it all, following their daily routine as if it was sunny and dry.

The Pushfaces spent scant time in the yard and burrowed in the blankets at night. It's like being surrounded with warm bricks, comforting but also confining. I dug out my sweatshirts and thick socks and finally succeeded in forcing a jacket on Papa, who had been doing outside chores in a short-sleeved shirt. He may not have needed it, but I felt better.

In a day or two we will have sunshine, which is wonderful during the day, but means bitter cold nights. The coyotes will come close, their high, wild song sharp on the crystal clear air, and the stars will glitter like chips of ice against a velvet sky. Woodsmoke will tinge the air, a comforting smell, and we will remember other November nights as we come into the warmth of our own firelight.

Now if I can just find those gloves.

Search for the perfect Christmas tree

The Christmas tree sits waiting to be decorated. If it is impatient, it doesn't show it. It's a nice tree, pretty shape, green and aromatic. The smell is quite distinct when you enter the room, pleasant and fresh. It isn't nearly as pretty as the tree we had last year. That was last year, I tell myself, and this is a nice tree. How important is it, in the grand scheme of things, that a tree be visually stunning, anyhow? As it turns out, kind of important, at least to me.

Intellectually, I am not happy with myself for being dissatisfied with this tree. It really is an okay tree, after all. How many people don't have any kind of tree, or anything to go under it? How fortunate am I to have this nice tree, and the ability to put some gifts under its branches? How fortunate am I even to be here to be dissatisfied, and to have those I love most still here, too?

Many, many people are not that lucky. I know, I know. Ungrateful beast that I am, I know! And yet this is one thing it's hard to let go of, in a world that sometimes seems to be mostly about letting go. The annual Christmas Tree Hunt has always been a big deal around here. Most of the time, I'm not that hard to please (well, not that hard), but in the matter of Christmas trees, I am. After all, I say firmly to any and all who will listen, it's only once a year, and I want it to be perfect.

Now, nobody knows better than I that perfection, while an attractive concept, is almost never achieved, and that small imperfections make most things more interesting and endearing to us. So it's a bit out of bounds to be so picky about a Christmas tree. I just always have been.

Eons ago, when the kids were little, we bought fir trees at the local Boy Scout tree lot. We piled in the car and discussed what we wanted on the way to the lot, which was well lit and had all the trees standing in majestic rows waiting for families to wander through the artificial forest and choose their own tree. Papa's preference was simple; not too tall to fit in the house, with a trunk not so large it wouldn't fit in the stand, and chosen without a lot of fuss, ie. quickly. He knew what was coming, but he always hoped for his agenda.

The kids wanted the biggest tree we could find, the grandest in every way; eight-foot ceilings and limited floor space had no impact on their earnest desire for a whopping big specimen. I pretty much concurred, with the caveat of perfect shape and thick branches added on. It took a while to find one we all agreed was our perfect tree, but we always did, and once it was decorated we all agreed that it was the prettiest tree we'd ever had.

The kids grew up, Papa got even busier, and finally only I had the obsession, undiluted by time or advancing age, to choose the perfect tree.

I was accompanied by whatever family members had the time or inclination, and there was a modicum of interest expressed, I suspect more to pacify me than because of any particular importance attached to the chore. It was usually



The lights of the Christmas tree on the historic Williamson County Courthouse lawn were glowing brightly on a warm Christmas evening in Georgetown in 2015. Many families were stopping by to take photos here before the lights come down for another year.

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Grandson Two's mom and me, with Papa stopping in later with his truck to pick up what we had chosen.

Grandkids improved the picture for a while; Papa's interest was revived, and the season was marked by spirited exchanges between the boys concerning the merits of natural versus artificial.

Grandson One's mom, being uber organized and fanatically tidy, chose artificial.

Grandson Two's mom, being of a more natural bent, went for "real." It made for some interesting conversations in the back seat that often escalated into fisticuffs if not defused. Christmas tree forays were once again family adventures.

In due time, the boys got older; the tree became less of an issue, and once more the excursion dwindled to our daughter and me, joined by whatever grandchild was interested in going. Sara went, of course, and often as not Grandson Two, especially after he got his driver's license and had a pickup.

It's lovely to have a big fellow to patiently drag out one tree after another; pound the butt of it on the ground to shake down the branches, and twirl it on command for an old lady to ponder over. Finding a perfect tree was much more in the realm of possibility, thanks to his patience.

Trees changed in those years, as well. The fir trees of our youth grew wild in the mountains somewhere, harvested by hardy woodcutters whistling as they worked (at least in our imagination). Most were far from perfect because they

truly were "natural."

It pained me a bit to think of them growing sturdy and strong, cut down in their prime and discarded after a few weeks of glory.

These trees were slowly but surely replaced by the "farmed" trees we have now, offered in numerous shapes and sizes, varieties and persuasions. They've been trimmed and shaped and tended all their lives in preparation for their grand debut, and I feel a bit less pained about them somehow.

Especially when I see the price tag.

The one thing that hasn't changed, however, and apparently isn't going to, is my desire for a perfect Christmas tree. We had one last year, and it was one of the first ones I looked at. It was truly a thing of beauty; everybody said so.

This year, the trip was rushed and hurried, the salespeople diffident, interested in whatever was on their cell phones and/ or anxious to have us out of the way, and Grandson Two unavailable.

The trees were still all bundled up and I finally got a pair of scissors and cut some loose myself, but without anyone bigger and stouter than Sara, her mom, and me, it was hard to shake out branches and make a good choice. I settled.

Once the lights and ornaments and icicles are on it, I know it will be a beautiful tree. It's not bad, just standing there like it is, and I'm truly grateful for it and for another Christmas season.

But next year ...