

FEBURARY 28, 1974

Wind swept around the saddle shed. Shot-sized gravel pelleted any upright object. Just enough light broke through the billows to color the surroundings a polarized gray.

To saddle my horse, I had to hold the pad in place with one hand and bend over my stomach to grasp the horn. Barn doors were popping; holes in the eaves were making whistling sound.

Monday morning is supposed to be the test of the week, but it is not supposed to be backed by a Shortgrass dust storm. It was beyond the limits of the worst expectations. Drouths are the penance for past and present sins, but to have dusters on a Monday was unfair.

Out in the pasture, I watched a Spanish nannie goat dry-nursing two kids. Her hair was turned the wrong direction; her hip bones stuck out far too high. The wind was making the sad threesome fight to stay earthborn. The scraggly old sister looked like she'd dug in against the weather.

A lone dogie lamb jumped from under a bush on a draw. Wind had whipped this pitiful creature until he couldn't make his stomach growl for hunger, much less bleat.

I thought to myself (and that's the only way to think in a blast of wind and dirt), "Noelke, my boy, 400 short miles to the east, ships sail out into the warm gulf. Fish are nettled in soft nets and good money is paid hands to clean them. Dirt doesn't blow through their ear lobes, nor do sharp rocks pellet their cabins."

Gusts would change direction to break through the heavy coat. The horse fought to keep his head from the force of the wind. I thought: "somewhere there is a sandy beach so soft that the coconuts don't make a sound hitting the ground. Monkeys do circus tricks all day long to entertain people. Ripples are called waves. The wind never picks up a grain of sand."

Cows were standing with their heads down. Mud balls were forming underneath their eyes. Again I thought: "fresh pineapple chills to a perfect breakfast fruit. Palm fronds make a soft bed. Bushes don't have to have thorns. Winds don't have to wreck the soil."

At a watering, the tank was spilling over the sides. Two self feeder salt troughs were parted from their tin tops. The wheel on the windmill was cutting on and off, growling under the strain of the wind. This time I dreamed: "Spring water runs into pools decorated by blooming water lilies. Ferns and gardenias hang from the banks. Pitchers of cold beer are stationed underneath shady trees. Small birds disturb the stillness chasing away the bugs."

We got the cattle together. My partner had to fight to keep his hat lodged on his ears. Dust and wind burned our faces. We were forced to dismount to move the baby calves wobbling along behind.

The herder's life is a romantic one. Coyotes and cats plunder his flocks. Dust and cold tear at his hide. Drouth is his punishment and freedom his reward.