

One routine my friend and I follow is going outdoors after dusk and before dawn to look at the stars. Minutes later comes the spectacle of the morning sun, or minutes before darkness at evening-tide flares the un-spelled, or unlimited drama of a shortgrass sunset. These critical moments, encounters – celestial ones – connect us to our surroundings.

Over the wire, if apart, she reports Venus' position. Also, new bird sightings for the season at hand, or minute herder observations like green tinges in grasses or leaves and dews and fogs covering the land, especially rain readings to one-one hundredths of the fraction.

Weeks ago, awakening in a big hotel in Austin, our fifth floor room overlooked the elevated lanes of North Highway 183 to cast a world as alien to us as a spaceship's log. In spite of the three-block buffer zone and the hour, the tires whining against the asphalt, singing the fury and the frantic music of city life, penetrated the room. We opened the heavy, thick drapes to peer through tall glass-paneled doors opening onto a narrow balcony over the rail at the mad race of motorists.

Fog lowered over the speedway, further darkening and blurring visibility. Traffic volume increased to the whine

and grinding of a rock drill hitting the red beds – like igneous rock dulling a bit, seems a better description.

She pulled the drapes back across the glass in a swift, power-filled motion. The sound of the hangers grating against the rods and the drapes waving to closure signaled “finale” or “the end.”

So much suspended cloth muffled the din of the traffic and hid the fog. (Will yield on hid the fog – shame, shame.) She snapped a battery light on her book. I dressed for a downstairs breakfast.

The clothes from the night before were easiest to find in the dim setting. Early morning on a Sunday in Austin, any piece of clothing from a doctor’s office gown to a pair of roustabout’s coveralls satisfy the weekend fashion code of the Capitol and University crowd.

The black belt slid back into the loops of gray flannel pants. The handmade Japanese bow tie cut from the rear end of an old peach and off-white silk kimono threaded back under the collar of the blue oxford shirt, a style Uncle Goat Whiskers introduced to the shortgrass scene from Boston in the ‘20s. The blue blazer jacket styled and tailored, led the gray, the peach, the off-white to form the aura of a well-dressed gentleman.

The fog and traffic forgotten, I bounded into the hall to a dead halt in front of the mirrored door of the elevator. After punching "down," I stood tilting my head and turning from side to side to savor the costume and appreciate my profile.

On the empty elevator, surrounded by four mirrored walls, a shock wracked my system powerful enough to have backlashed the funkiest horror film to ever be threaded on a reel. The reaction froze. No, I mean a message froze: "Here I stand, dressed in the exact cut, colors, kinds, labels and styles I wore leaving the University and the Land Office of the township of Austin, Texas, 60 years ago to go back to the ranch."

No wonder the night before in the Japanese restaurant, heads kept turning and looking away. Those town cowboys thought I was an actor from the Little Theater group, or in disguise to divert the attention from a real secret agent. Little as I know about undercover work, I am sure those barstool devotees of Japanese sake and rice hops probably concluded I was a delegate to the Parent-Teachers' lobby, twirling chopsticks to cover being from a small Texas school.

I was way out of contact with bar patrons or Japanese drinks. It was at the World's Fair in New York some 50

years back that my brother and I relied on hot sake in the Japanese exhibit to stimulate our understanding of Oriental customs. Most I recall, however, is how innocuous a delicate hot potion, served by petite, dark-haired ladies in long dark gowns, contained the blow of a stun gun and the after-effects of flu vaccine.

Once I landed, the lobby was all but vacant. The room clerk looked like his girlfriend not only cut his hair, but also tied his tie. Two or three tables in the restaurant were occupied by families too busy wiping oatmeal off toddlers' faces and pleading with teenagers to stop scowling to notice whether I was wearing a diver's bell or a baseball umpire's mask.

One gray-haired lady smiled in the buffet line. She appeared to be a regular guest at the hotel. Her hairstyle looked familiar. I thought later that she might have gone to the University or worked at the Land Office back when I was picking my wardrobe...