

STATE LINES: MIXING RAIN AND LIFE • GARDENING IN AN URBAN NATURE CENTER

TEXAS

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Buffalo Business

Shaggy icons of the Old West are being raised in small herds on Texas ranches as an alternative to beef

Days of rain on chestnuts

By Thomas M. Ciesla

The rains of my boyhood were benevolent and comforting when I lived on the shores of Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes named after the Indian tribes that once lived around them. Autumn and spring were sometimes stormy, but more typical were the slow, soaking rains that could last for days on end.

I would leave my bedroom window open, allowing the wind and rain to lull me to sleep. For a love-torn teenager, the rain provided a somber world for me to walk through like some pathetic character in a movie.

"I'm having a Fellini moment," I mumbled to a friend who passed me one rain-drenched evening on my way to the lakeshore. He nodded knowingly. "She dumped you again, didn't she?" I nodded and walked off into the mist, convinced that the cameras were about to zoom in for a close-up. The weather was very therapeutic; the rain was my lifelong friend.

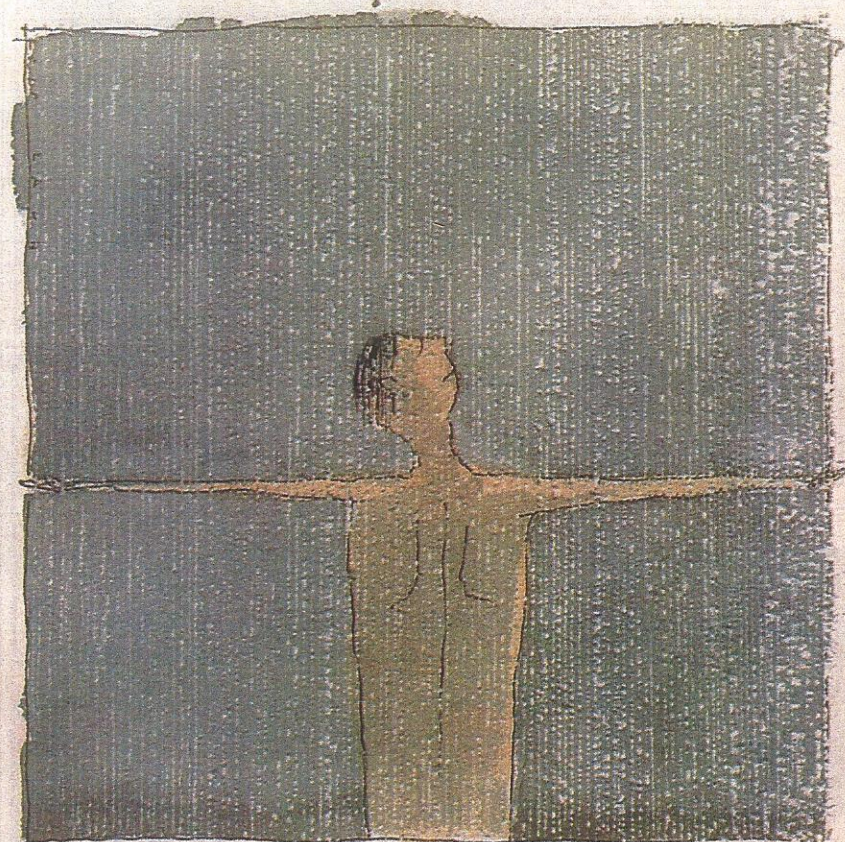
Then I moved to Houston. No one said a word; no one warned me that the friend of my boyhood was about to become a Mr. Hyde to my Dr. Jekyll. The soft, reassuring rain I had enjoyed for decades was gone, and in its place loomed a monster. I soon learned it doesn't just rain in Southeast Texas. Rain is far too polite a word. Here, rain is more than a meteorological event; it is an all-out assault on the environment. Houston rainstorms possess a kind of violence combined with a chaotic energy that explodes through the city, tearing off tree limbs and roofs and flooding neighborhoods with downpours. What I did not realize at the time was that these rains mirrored my attitude toward life. There was within me a storm culture ready to explode, a frustration born of the conflict between too much youthful impertinence and impatience and too little maturity

and wisdom.

During my first year in Houston, the words rain and fear became synonymous. The fear was not just in my own mind. It was evident everywhere as a palpable force, filling the airwaves and the newspapers. The approach of the first cold front triggered a stream of frantically beeping messages across the bottoms of television screens and warnings on radio shows. During hurricane season, stories and images of past storm atrocities were regurgitated. Occasionally, a hurricane actually threatened, whipping the public into a frenzy that emptied stores of flashlights, batteries and beer. Beer? Well, sure. As everyone who lives along the Gulf Coast knows, all storms — especially hurricanes — go better with mass quantities of booze, the theory apparently being that you'll be too snookered to care when the storm tears your house apart and sends you to that big Weather Channel in the sky because you were too stupid to leave.

In my fifth year in Houston, I was busy climbing the corporate ladder, traveling and carousing. As I stood on a Galveston beach that summer watching a distant waterspout dance back and forth in a storm, I was drawn to a raven-haired woman standing nearby. After hesitant introductions and idle chitchat, I looked into her eyes and saw goodness, beauty and the promise of tomorrow. The next few months we spent all of our time together until a business trip briefly separated us, awakening me to a transparent human truth — the need for others, the need for love. We were married within a year.

During my eighth year in Houston, a hurricane arrived, bringing with it torrential rains, ferocious winds, destruction and a gloomy week bereft of tap water and electricity. This was my first hurricane, and over the next 12 hours I came to under-



Rolf Laub / Special to the Chronicle

stand that the power of a hurricane is unspeakable. The day after the storm, I became restless and strangely saddened. For me, the overwhelming power of the hurricane underscored a growing sense of my own helplessness. Lately when I looked into my wife's eyes, that "promise of tomorrow" I once saw was gone. I didn't know why. I didn't have the courage to discuss it. In the days after the hurricane, I was sorry that I hadn't been swept away by the storm.

And then our son was born. His arrival was my avatar, allowing me to cast aside all the accumulated unproductive anger and despair.

One thing that didn't change was my fascination with the weather, both the internal and external varieties. As a child needing nurturing, I had seen the rains as nurturing. As a

teenager full of angst and striving for an identity of my own, I saw fear and anger in the rains. As a driven young man trying to get ahead and blow through any obstacle in my way, I was intoxicated by the power and violence of a Houston rainstorm — a formidable force of nature — a phrase I used to define myself on occasion. Now that I was a father, the chimerical rain transformed itself again, and I began to find solace and inspiration in its rhythms.

From the protection of a heavy-timbered pavilion I listened to storm fronts roll into the area like an unstoppable goliath, followed by the sound of rain hitting the canopy of trees above me, still not touching the ground. I braced myself as a threatening roar replaced the gentle sound. Distant lightning and thunder flashed and

boomed above me. The hair on my arms stood on end as the atmosphere around me danced with electrical charges. The lightning flashed nonstop, creating rolling thunder so powerful that I could feel it resonate in my chest. I took a deep breath to calm my trembling excitement and to notice something unusual about the air: It smelled so pure. The ionization caused by the lightning had changed the "taste" of the air around me. I wanted to take in lungful after lungful.

As the lightning continued, I wiped the built-up moisture from my brow and tried to focus on the rain directly in front of me, on what was real and tangible. Another lightning bolt, and the raindrops were frozen in space and time, shimmering crystalline beads stopped in their descent for my inspection.

For a brief moment the light-scattering orbs allowed me to appreciate their translucent perfection. Then, as the storm rumbled into the distance, I was spent and hurried inside. I had seen too much of rain's power and beauty to bear any more.

Viewing the world through a father's eyes over the years, I've come to pay more attention to the gentle, slow, soaking rains of Southeast Texas. They were always there. I simply hadn't been ready to appreciate them. They are like the rains of my boyhood, forgoing the theatrics of lightning and swirling wind.

The rains of my past are now the rains of my present, quietly slipping into the area while a cloud cover and the sound of drizzle draw a hushed veil over the city, silencing the unending roar of traffic, airplanes, lawn mowers and emergency vehicles. I appreciate the silence.

This is a contemplative rain, lingering as a companion while I read on the back porch or sit quietly to watch the local menagerie of animals root around, oblivious to the weather surrounding them. Pulling on a jacket, I step into the drizzle. The neighborhood is oddly still, and the sound and smell of the rain take me back to my childhood. I remember the pure joy of playing in the rain, and I find myself as a 10-year-old boy again. I hear my mother shout, "You'll catch your death in that cold rain." I stretch out my arms. I love this rain. I loved that rain.

In my mind, I smell the aroma of homemade peanut butter cookies coming from Mrs. Berger's kitchen window next door. I'm sure I can talk her out of a few of them. Somehow I always do.


But first I have something else to do. Spotting the perfect rock, I run across the street and,

squinting through the raindrops, I heave the rock upward as hard as I can to knock down a fat cluster of chestnut pods from my neighbor's tree. As the swollen, prickly pods fall to the ground, they burst open, releasing maroon chestnuts that stand out vividly against the wet green grass. With the rain soaking the back of my neck, I gather up about 30 chestnuts and run back home before mean ol' Mr. Miller comes out to chase me away. How could I resist? Every boy knows that rainy days are the best time to go chestnut

hunting. But it's not really the chestnuts that I want, it's their hypnotic color: a color so rich that it seems to pulsate as I hold them in my hands. I love the possession as much as I love the hunt.

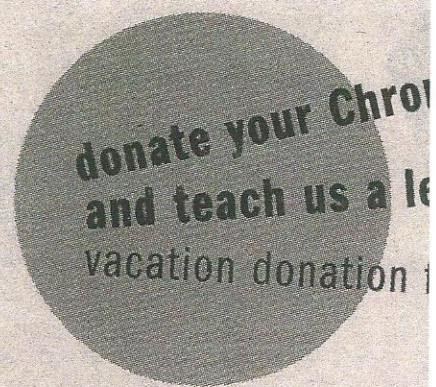
A passing car breaks my thoughts, and I'm back in the present. I feel the rain on my face and remember that in the smaller, simpler world of my childhood, those chestnuts were a personal trea-

sure. Thirty chestnuts and 30 years; that's how much time has passed since the days of rain on chestnuts.

The drizzle continues to soak my face as I feel a tug on my jacket. It's my 10-year-old son. He's bored. I tell him to get a jacket. We're going to the park. I want him to see the world through the rain's eyes and appreciate it as I have over the years. I want the rain to be his friend, too. Besides, there's a corner store on the way, and I have a sudden craving for peanut butter cookies, and the pecan tree in front of ol' man Wandler's house should be ripe for harvesting. We just need the perfect rock. 

Thomas M. Ciesla is an architectural and landscape designer and the author of *Touring Texas Wineries* (Lone Star Books, \$19.95).

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