

THROUGH THE SEASONS
With
NATURE AS A MIRROR

By Dorothy Adair Gonick



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These articles have been based on an appreciation of nature begun with my parents, Earl and Mary Adair, on our farm. Hikes in the woods and nature preserves with my husband Walter, and our children added new awareness of beauty around us.

I was introduced to the art of Chinese Brush painting by Richard Yeung and Hsiao-chiang Clara Chen. Through their presentations, I became fascinated with the Chinese way of attributing characteristics to plants and animals and have added my own reflections to those.

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I am most thankful to our God, Who has created this wonderful and varied world and welcomes us to use and enjoy all that He has created.

NATURE AS A MIRROR

Table of Contents

<u>Titles</u>	<u>Pages</u>
Chinese Orchid.....	2
Violet.....	4
Dandelion.....	6
Daffodil.....	8
Iris.....	10
Rose.....	12
Hydrangea.....	14
Bamboo.....	16
Morning Glory.....	18
Lotus.....	20
Grapes.....	22
Seashells.....	24
Mushrooms.....	26
Chrysanthemum.....	28
Apples.....	30
Black Walnut.....	32
Autumn Leaves.....	34
Cornucopia.....	36
Plum Blossom.....	38
Gifts.....	40
Honey Bees.....	42
Holly.....	44
Snowflakes.....	46
Winter Birds.....	48
The Horse.....	50
Pine Tree.....	52

CHINESE ORCHID

*Delicate blossoms wave in the air,
Fragrance wafting on the breeze,
Heralding spring's arrival.*



The CHINESE ORCHID

The Chinese Orchid is the Chinese symbol for spring and release from the winter cold. It is a small humble plant, not ostentatious, but is forthright, lively and resilient. The blossoms send their fragrance along the spring breezes leading one to find it blooming unobtrusively in meadowlands and in rock crevices, giving the joy and pleasure of a greeting. It is often found growing beside a rock as though accepting the sheltering presence of a strength greater than itself. This resilient plant bends low during stormy weather, then recovers its uprightness and continues to send forth its beauty and fragrance.

The leaves of the orchid are painted in a manner that forms the eye of a Phoenix, denoting wisdom. Other qualities assigned the orchid are grace, flexibility, joy and friendship.

Among our friends, as well as in our own mirror, we often see the resilience of this orchid during trying times, and savor the beauty of forthright, lively companionship in our everyday lives.

Enjoy the beauty of each day and all you encounter.

THE VIOLET

*Shy, unpretentious,
Cheerful, friendly violet,
Spring's bouquet of love.*



VIOLETS

We watch with anticipation for the first signs of spring, expecting familiar flowers to bring smiles of joy to our lives. Almost as soon as the first leaves emerge from their winter dormancy, the smiling faces of the violets open to gladden our hearts. The barrenness of winter's color has been replaced with sunny yellow forsythia and daffodils with the accent of violet and periwinkle. These delight the eye and lift our spirits in songs of delight. Later we will find the carpet of violets still blooming abundantly under the dogwood and magnolia trees. Our own days bloom with happiness and joy when we waken early in the morning with a smile and anticipation for the events of the day, with a glad heart not unlike the violet. There are times when happy events help us to shine more brightly and spread joy just as those violets which seemed eager to become a bouquet of love for our loved ones.

I have fond memories of a special spot on our farm where the violets grew large and profusely. Each Mother's Day we would gather bouquets of these violets to spread cheer throughout the house. The violet was our Mom's favorite spring flower, and our bouquets with their heart-shaped leaves spoke of our love. God gives us a bouquet of His love and splendor each and every day with infinite variety, and our spirits are lifted whenever we recognize His gifts to us. Our appreciation of His beauties is our gift to Him.

The violet seems content to be of humble stature and lowly in growth compared to the trumpeting daffodil and flourishing forsythia, just as some of our dearest friends are those who are content to applaud the accomplishments of others—content to let their own quiet beauty blossom in unheralded praise. It is said that it takes all kinds to make the world go round. Some of my favorite 'kinds' are those who reflect the traits of the violet.

When we see our first violet smiling up at us, we become aware that there are many others blooming in their cheery way—violets spread profusely with their underground roots. When we receive a smile, our response invariably is to return the smile; soon we are aware that smiles spread much like the violets as smiling faces soon surround us.

DANDELIONS

*Bright golden blossoms
Heralding springs arrival,
Delighting children.*



DANDELIONS

Early in the spring amid wreaths of serrated leaves, bloom bright yellow flowers like drops of golden sunshine. Delighted children gather handfuls of the blossoms and bring the cheer indoors. The plants' deep root supplies the nourishment to the plant and also helps resist repeated attempts to eradicate it from our lawns. Children await the formation of the downy puffballs of seed and send them aloft with hearty puffs of breath. The seeds sail on the breeze to settle on fertile ground to germinate, producing new plants.

Both novice and the experienced gardener are ever looking for a perfect plant: one that is hardy, easy to grow, and lovely. If you ask a child "What is your favorite spring flower?" don't be surprised if the answer is "Dandelions!" They magically appear early in spring, are hardy, easy to grow, and lovely to behold. We consider a weed to be any plant that grows where it is not wanted. Dandelions are most often thought of as weeds and as we try to eradicate them from our lawns, we can admire their tenaciousness as we note the deep roots that anchor them firmly in the soil. The pungent flavor of steamed dandelion greens was a welcome addition to the winter diet of our forefathers, and perhaps of you, also.

The happiest people are often those content with everyday life rather than striving for the glamour of high society and excessive wealth. They enjoy the beauties of God's creation: family, health, nature, laughter, and all that give life meaning and purpose as they persevere with daily toil to provide for family needs. These people are the backbone of our country and I'm sure they bring great joy to our Creator. They remind me of the motto: 'Bloom where you are planted.'

Just as the dandelion blossom wilts after being plucked from its source of nourishment, so do we 'wilt' when life deals us a cutting blow. We can pull much of the dandelion plant from our lawn, but then to our dismay, its deep root will allow it to sprout again. Eradication of an annoying habit can be as difficult as destroying a pesky dandelion plant. Hopefully when disaster comes to our life, we find our roots of faith deep enough to provide the sustenance needed for our renewal to a happy, productive life. Just as a child sees beauty in the dandelion that is unappreciated by most adults, we can look for the beauty in the commonplace. We may 'sow seeds' that benefit mankind and the world with our friendships, hopes, faith, understanding and love.

Questions to ponder:

Are we rooted deep enough in our beliefs to withstand the discouragements of life?

Are we of benefit to others through our cheerful outlook on life?

Throughout our lives we 'plant our seeds.'

What will grow? Flowers or weeds?

DAFFODIL

*Cheerful nodding blooms,
Golden stars carpet the ground
Welcoming the Spring.*



THE DAFFODIL

It is pleasant to recall the eagerness of our children as we planted daffodil bulbs in the fall. They would place them the correct depth and cover carefully with soil, trusting the winter cold would not harm them. The anticipation of the daffodil's spring glory would be rewarded in the spring as they noted the slender green leaves emerging from the drab winter ground. Later we would notice the many cheerful daffodils blooming in yards and parks throughout the area—thousands spilling over the countryside. Hubbard Park in Meriden, Connecticut has been planted with many thousands of daffodil bulbs, blooming each year for their Daffodil Festival, a wonderful sight to see and experience.

The familiar legend of the Daffodil relates the reason for its star shape. Each time a Guardian Angel notices a good deed during Lent, the angel plucks a gold star from the heavens and sends it to earth, where it blooms as a daffodil. That is why the term Lenten Lily is often used. Further thoughts lead me to visualize that as good deeds are done throughout the year, are they stored within the bulb as treasure to be brought forth each spring, bursting forth to bring joy to all who feast their eyes upon them? This spring, as we view the host of daffodils, let us recall and give thanks for all the loving and kind deeds that we've experienced. Our hearts can be filled and overflow with gratitude. Each time we recall a thoughtful act or deed of kindness it blooms again in our minds and hearts with remembrance of the love and beauty of that moment.

Could the blooming daffodils be earth's response to all the caring thoughtful deeds, prayers and acts of love it has seen? Let us be aware that however small a token of love may be, it can brighten the days of another and bloom in their heart with a touch of spring.

IRIS

*Delicate as a butterfly,
The fragile appearance
Belies its sturdiness.*



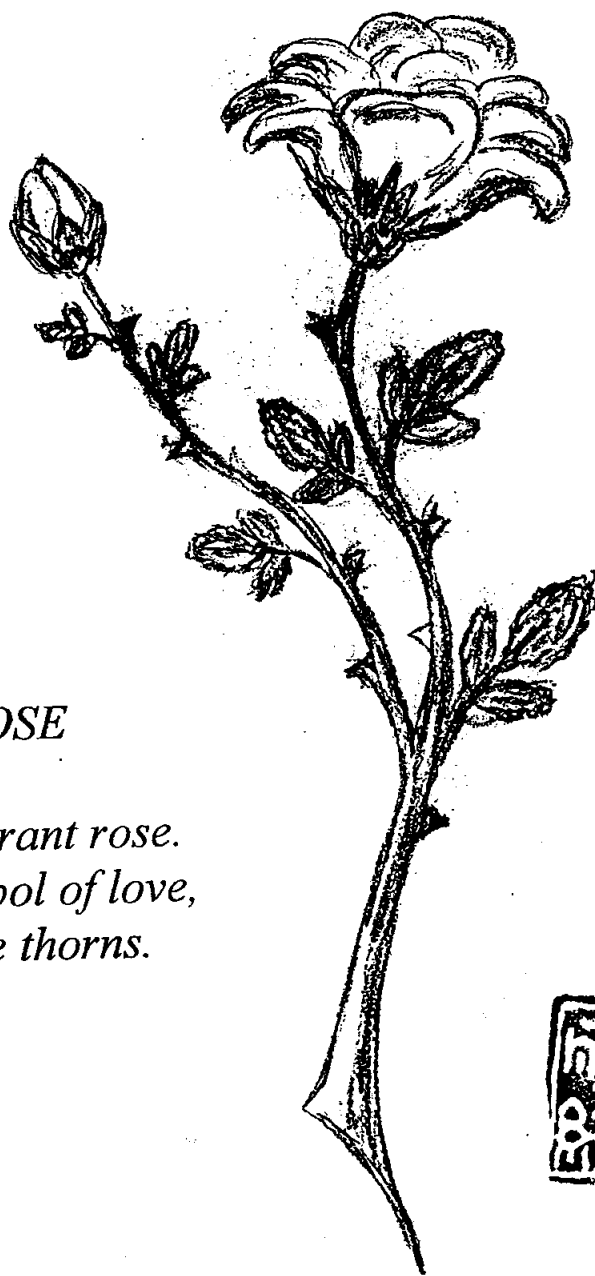
IRIS

Reflections on Iris

Life sealed within a fleshy root
unaffected by icy soil
Lifts leafy blades when awakened
by returning spring.
Atop the strong sturdy foliage
there blooms a delicate flower—
Three petals open wide to reveal
their inner beauty,
Three petals curve inward as though
protecting inner thoughts and
treasured musings.

Our family and friends are the warm spring touch and sturdy support that awakens us to bud and bloom in our own individual way. Recognizing our strengths, they give us freedom to open and share our loveliness, yet honor our need to protect our inner thoughts.

Often it is the frail and winsome person who surprises us with their inner strength in overcoming the stormy times of life. These are the people who are the irises in my life. I'm certain you can think of many who have this inner strength and who bloom in your lives with love and friendship.



THE ROSE

*Lovely, fragrant rose.
Eternal symbol of love,
Rises above thorns.*



ROSES

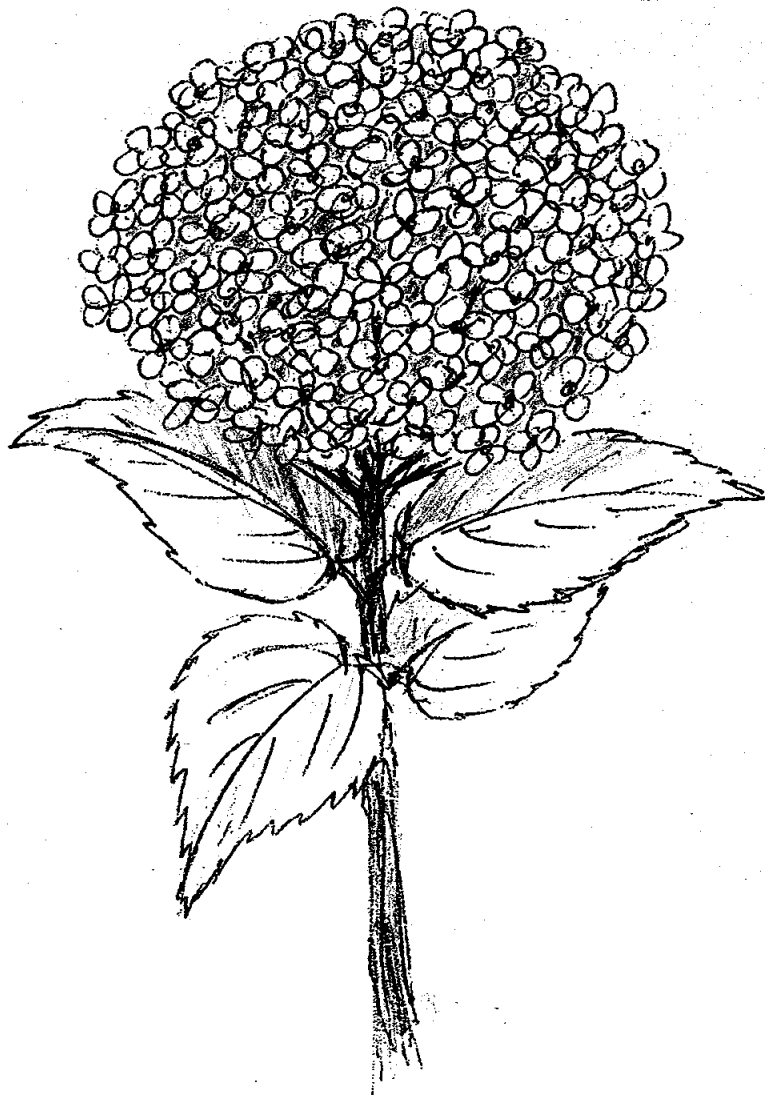
For me, this mirror reflects memories of my childhood in Iowa and of four special varieties of roses. I loved the fragrance and cheeriness of the wild roses blooming in the meadows and along the roadsides. Summer breezes carried the fragrance of the many small pink roses climbing on our porch trellis. Admired by all were Mom's prized Peace Roses, so delicate and lovely in their creamy pink beauty. On St. Valentine's Day, the beauty of long-stemmed roses spoke of deep affection. These lead me to wonder: Why did God create thorns and roses on the same bush?

We tend and care for our rose bushes without regard for the thorns they bear because we anticipate the beauty and fragrance that will surely come. We accept the thorns as an integral part of the rose. This reminds me of a favorite saying: *"We can complain because rose bushes have thorns or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses."*

Further reflection leads me to wonder: If we accept and embrace the thorny times in our lives, can we expect that 'roses' will bloom? In reflecting on our loveliest events we may also see the thorny path that led to the goodness, where blessing came out of a time of trial, much like childbirth. We can choose to enjoy the sweet triumph of our 'roses' or complain of the thorns we experienced along the way. Perhaps this answers my question: Why did God create thorns and roses on the same bush?

HYDRANGEA

*Full, compact and proud,
Flowering in the garden.
A bouquet of love.*



HYDRANGEAS

The hydrangea plant is recognized by its large, full, compact cluster of small flowers. Framed by a wreath of leaves, the hydrangea blossom is supported by a sturdy woody stem. The individual florets are quite uniform in size and height, none overpowering the others, to form the lovely blossom. Seeing a mass of hydrangea plants in bloom is a delight, they look so regal and unperturbed in their majesty. Often they are the focal point of a garden, and estates may be framed with a border of bright hydrangeas giving cheer to those passing by. The long lasting bloom still has beauty after frost has taken life from it. The brittle, crisp cluster is often used in dried floral arrangements to add lace-like delicacy, much like the lasting effect of memories one has of another person, such as parents and of those no longer living, but their loving care and principles still contribute meaning to our days.

There are many types of organizations today, each with a purpose. There is special beauty in groups and families that are bound closely in purpose and love, reflecting the togetherness we see in the hydrangea blossom. I'm sure God views with delight the many groups that strive together in harmony to achieve a goal. Support groups are formed to ease the pain of illness or loss, others form to assist in understanding and conquering misfortune or addiction, other groups serve to alleviate needs in the community and around the world. We may be part of several groups and our individual traits and talents add to the completeness and beauty of each, believing in the saying; "In unity there is strength"—unity being the sturdy stem supporting our purpose. May the underlying purpose be to celebrate the joy of living through achieving goals, supporting teams or worshipping our God together. Each is helpful for a joy-filled life.

We are each a blossom embodying the talents, abilities, hopes, dreams and concerns that God bestows on each of His children to inspire us in our efforts to create beauty in our world. Let us use them daily to experience joy and to pass it on.

BAMBOO

*Stately symbol of summer.
Green sheltering presence
Undaunted by storms.
Plant of many uses.*



木北
百
系



BAMBOO

The Chinese often choose, as a gift, a painting that depicts admirable characteristics of the recipient. A painting of Bamboo would be chosen for some of the following reasons.

The Chinese symbol for summer is the bamboo plant. It has no season of dormancy as it is always green and continually growing; a symbol of life. Bamboo grows straight and tall. The Chinese refer to it as an 'Honorable Gentleman' who has integrity and singleness of purpose; one who is straightforward and honest in duty and relationships. The Bamboo plant grows in sections marked by joints that suggest the discipline of high morals and principles. The bamboo plant has a hollow center suggesting that one is humble and unassuming without need for self-importance. This person will accomplish goals without fanfare. The bamboo plant is flexible. It will bend with stormy winds and quickly recover after the storm. It is not easily broken by circumstances.

Bamboo is a giving plant. All parts are useful. We enjoy the young bamboo shoots as a delicacy, and bamboo is the major source of food for the Pandas. The stems are used for chopsticks and for brushes that artists use for writing and painting. Fishermen use a bamboo fish pole. Stalks also become fencing and structural building materials. It is easy to understand the importance of bamboo to the Chinese because they use them in art, recreation, food, tools, structures and other areas of life.

A person with these traits of the bamboo is admired and has many friends; therefore I have painted a gentle Panda with the Bamboo to signify reliability, trust and companionship.

Morning Glory

*You proclaim the glory of the morn,
Tendrils anchoring the climbing vine,
Creating beauty and joy each morn.*



Morning Glory

The summer rays of the morning sun awaken the tightly furled flower, which responds by gracefully opening its trumpet-shaped blooms of delicate beauty. There is a joyousness that wells up in our hearts as we view the unfolding of the Morning Glory. The spindly stems twine around a nearby support and cling with a tenacity that belies its weakness. Lacking physical strength, it seems to have chosen to use its energy to create beauty for the surrounding area.

There are people in our lives who have physical infirmities that hinder their agility, yet they possess sunny dispositions and a joyful outlook that belies the challenges they surmount each day. There are those who have learned to trust in the support of others and of God's grace when overwhelmed by sorrow or adversity, greeting each morning with a welcoming heart and sunny outlook. Just as the Morning Glory delights our senses, these friends lift our spirits in a loving way.

The support we give to another is quite often repaid with a sense of joy in our hearts similar to the opening of a flower. Each day we can look for beauty in the commonness around us and respond by our own sunny outlook toward daily life, perhaps adding our own special beauty to the world around us.

LOTUS

*Lovely, fragrant lotus,
Rooted in nourishing mud,
Triumphs in beauty.*

桃
紅
絲



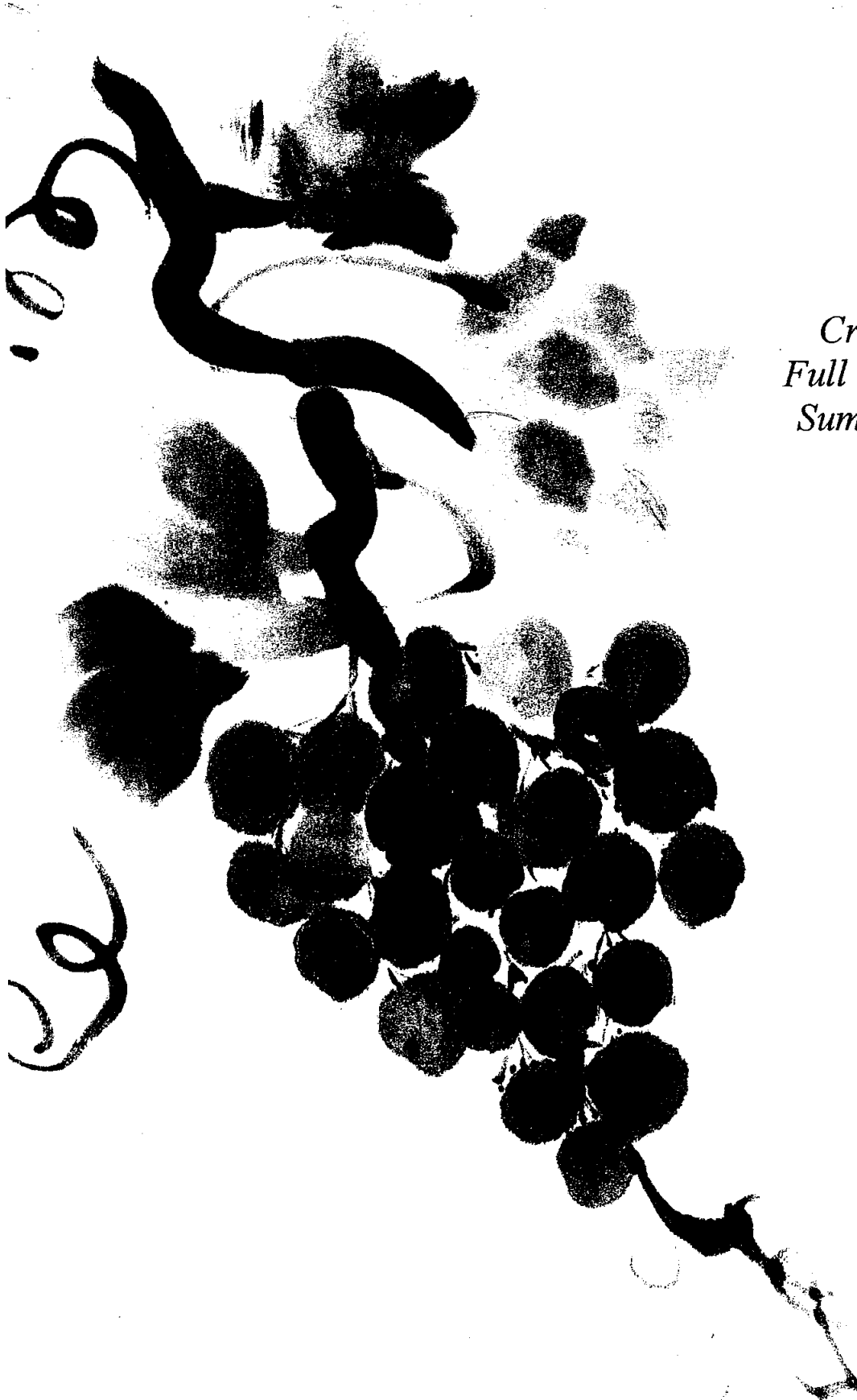
The LOTUS

We admire a full-blown lotus bloom for the beauty of its large, fragrant, showy flowers as it rises above the cool water on a strong stem flanked by large green pads of leaves. These strong green pads are often a welcome resting-place for insects, frogs and an occasional small bird. These delight us as we watch the varied life around the pond.

Enclosed among the petals of the lotus is an unusual seedpod. In its many depressions are large seeds that will be shaken from the pod to drop into the water and sink to the muddy depths of the pond. The outer covering of the seeds will soften and a sprout will burst from its casing to begin a new plant rooted in nourishing mud. The new plant rises from the murky darkness through the cool water to become a thing of beauty as it opens its lovely petals to the summer sun.

A Victorian book, "The Language of Flowers," attributes the quality of eloquence to the Lotus plant. On reflecting, I realized that the Lotus is eloquent as it speaks to me through its growth life; from muddiness to sunshine as it rises through the cool waters. There are times in our lives when we feel shaken and sent to the muddy bottom of life: perhaps the death of a loved one, a lost opportunity, a financial reversal, deteriorating health, or disappointment in a relationship. As we start anew we may feel as though the mire of our life is like the dark pond bottom. Yet as we struggle to make a new start we can ask our Lord for strength and wisdom as we open to new opportunities to reach for new heights. I have found the steadfastness of God's love to be both a refuge and a foundation for growth. We will find sunshine in our lives again as we bloom anew. In our center we still remember the past conflict and hopefully view it as the chamber of hope.

Because of its uniqueness, the dry seedpod is often gathered to use in floral arrangements to give character and contrast. There is a beauty in dried plant materials just as there is in the memories left us that give us hope and comfort. As we rise above our misfortunes, may we allow all our disappointments and hurts to be washed from our hearts and replaced with thankfulness to live in a country that allows us to begin anew and bloom in whatever area of life we are called to become fruitful.



GRAPES

*Crisp juicy clusters,
Full of refreshing flavor.
Summer's cool delight.*



GRAPES

The hot steamy days of summer lead us to enter the shady retreat of a vine-covered arbor, enhanced by lacey bits of sun and shadow filtering through the vines. It is a joy to see the clusters of glistening grapes and watch them grow with the promise of luscious, refreshing flavor. Our thoughts may wander to flavorful jams and jellies produced from the season's crop, and memories of the childhood pleasure of thick slices of homemade bread spread lavishly with jam. We may recall stashing a favorite snack of raisins in our knapsacks to enjoy while hiking along a woodland trail. Social occasions are often celebrated with a bottle of wine, and it holds special meaning for us in church communion rituals.

We may remember the careful pruning given the vine to enhance its productivity, and how we gathered the cuttings to create our "Welcome" wreath.

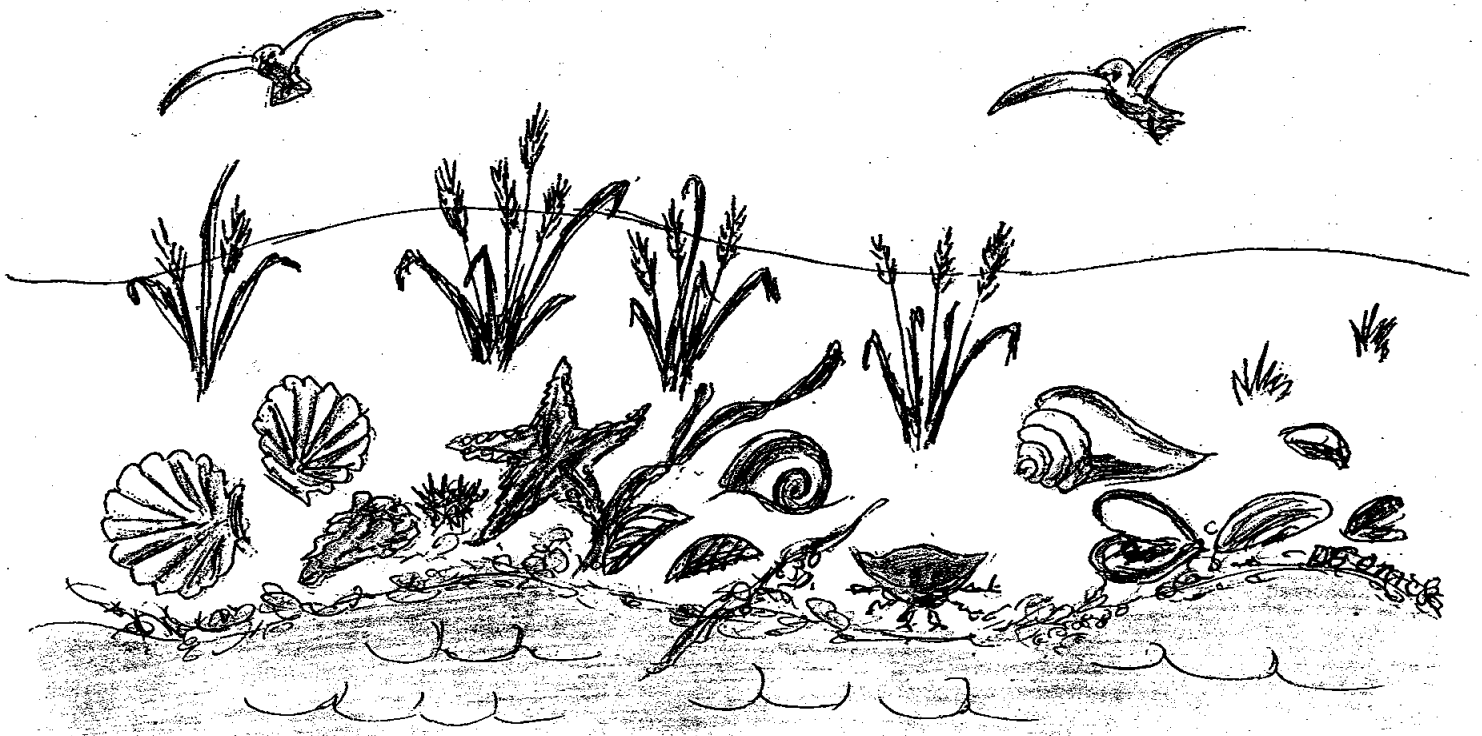
Throughout history, grapes have been relished in their various forms; fresh, dry or liquid. They have been pictured as a symbol of plenty, gaiety, and sacrifice. In 1897 the State of Connecticut adopted its state flag. Three grape vines were placed at the center to symbolize the Colony brought from Europe and transplanted in the wilderness. Tradition, Patriotism and Pride were the founding principles symbolized by these grapevines.

How does this 'mirror life?' The vines and grapes must undergo pruning and crushing to become the wreaths, jams and beverages we enjoy. Among our friends are those who have been crushed by life's circumstances and have become an inspiration and comfort to us. In many of these friends we encounter a sweetness and wisdom that was the result of the trials that were surmounted. Their empathy sustains those who are in need of an understanding heart, adding richness to life.

Today we have a variety of grapes from which to choose; white, red, black or ruby. Enjoy their juicy sweetness or tartness and be refreshed by nature's bounty.

SEASHELLS

*Many sculpted forms
Lying empty on the beach;
Treasures to be found.*



SEASHELLS

As a child growing up in Iowa far from the seashore, I admired a lovely conch shell my Grandmother used as a doorstep. It was a large, coral-colored wonder to me with its delicacy of color and form. I marveled at how God provides for the safety of creatures wherever they may live, and the infinite variety and beauty He has created. By pressing the shell to my ear and hearing the faraway roar of the ocean, I conjured up dreams of faraway shores and of the creatures living in the depths of the ocean. Years later we searched sandy beaches for the many forms of shells, still marveling at their formation and variety. We found lovely convoluted, empty shells and delighted in the peals of laughter and joy as our children gathered them from the sandy beach.

Some discarded shells have become home to hermit crabs that develop no shell of their own, but crawl into the discarded empty shell of another and carry it until it is outgrown, then will find another for its needed protection. This reminds me of actors who take on the 'shell' of a character and give it life and meaning. Children will often copy the actions and speech of people that have impressed them. Youth may try many 'hats' while searching for an identity and place in the world. Adults will enrich their lives by emulating good traits, leaving unhealthy habits 'on the shore' so as to become a more beautiful person.

I've always been impressed with the beauty of pearls and their formation. Within that rough, unpolished shell a shining pearl may reside. An irritating grain of sand had been accepted and through time was coated with minerals that caused a lustrous pearl to form. Within our beings we grow our own pearls by accepting irritations and overcoming the negative trials in our lives, thereby turning the negatives of life into pearls of compassion and understanding. We may see others who are struggling to overcome difficulties in their life. When we encourage them, we may help them to persevere and become lovelier through their trials.

The loveliness we see in our friends and neighbors is a reflection of their inner beauty. We also know that within the rough exterior of others, a pearl of rare beauty may be found.

MUSHROOMS

*Mystical mushrooms
Hidden in old leaf litter
Delight the children.*



MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms have fascinated me since childhood. My interest was piqued when an issue of National Geographic featured pictures and information of the myriad forms of the fungi. The sudden appearance of mushrooms and their quick, rapid growth still astonish me. Today the 'fairy rings' on the lawn remind me of delightful childhood imaginings of mystical creatures in fairy tales and of Alice in her wonderland.

Fungi were created to fill a purpose, that purpose is to cause wood and debris to be broken down and rot into nutritious soil. A fungus begins as a minute hairlike filament that obtains nutrition as it spreads its net known as mycelium through the wood and debris of a forest floor. This causes the wood to be broken down to rot into nutritious soil. Under favorable weather conditions a bud will form and rapidly grow to maturity as a mushroom. What a wonderful God we have that has created such small forms to recycle dead stuff and return it to benefit the earth. What a mess our land would be if all fallen branches and trees remained unaltered where they fell.

Many kinds of mushrooms may be found in a similar area; some will be benevolent and others quite deadly. Some are harmless when eaten, others may cause us to become sick or cause death. Some of the most beautiful are also the most deadly, as are those of the *Amanita* family. If these are eaten, they will destroy our inner organs, resulting in death. Beauty can often be deceiving: sometimes the things we most desire and find attractive will lead to our downfall as we struggle to acquire what may prove harmful to our well being.

Within our memories we may store many kinds of feelings that rise to the surface when unexpected. Our reactions to that memory may range from joy to hate and will affect our thoughts and actions. Somewhere I've read, "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Expressing our joy might spread joy to another and lift a heavy heart, whereas a negative reaction can only darken a relationship. We should guard against the poisons of ill will, self-pity, bitterness, temptations, wrongful habits and thoughts that can eat away our sense of peace and goodwill toward our fellowman. When bothered by the worries of life, instead of wringing our hands in distress, we can fold them in heartfelt prayer, expecting peace to return to our hearts.

As the fungi recycle dead debris into nutritious soil, we can recycle our thoughts and attitudes to healthful ones and quietly add kindness and goodwill that can transform areas of need in our world.

CHRYSANTHEMUM

*Lush summer foliage,
Harbinger
Of Autumn glory.*



桃
紅
菊
花



THE CHRYSANTHEMUM

We admire the lush beauty of fall chrysanthemums. Their abundant blooms brighten the countryside and cheer our days as the year readies itself for the wintry days to come. The plant branches out and has become bushy and full of buds due to several prunings during its growing season. It added a supportive accent of dark green to the rich variety of summers' floral beauty, then as the seasons progressed, the 'mums full glory burst forth to fill autumn days with luxuriant beauty and fragrance.

A Chinese quote says "The Chrysanthemum which blooms in the late autumn wind is comparable to a learned and wise person who can stand adverse environments without enmity to others, and who leads his own simple life." The Chinese symbol for autumn is the Chrysanthemum. It is sturdy yet supple; upright yet not rigid; its summer greenery full of promise. It is also a symbol of long life and of peace.

May we mirror the Chrysanthemum as we accept the 'prunings' that life gives us, believing we will bloom with beauty and fragrance, too.

APPLES

*Mounds of red and gold
Delight our sight and palate.
Crisp Autumn apples.*



APPLES

After the dormancy of winter, leaves begin to unfurl to welcome spring's warmth. Buds form and burst into the loveliness of blossom, whether peach, pear, apple, or plum, each crowning its tree with a garment of beauty. The color and fragrance delight our thirsting souls and also attract the honeybee to gather nectar and unknowingly pollinate the blossom. While going about our daily routine we too may unknowingly affect the life of another—hopefully in a beneficial manner. Interactions with others can benefit in varied ways, somewhat like a blossoming tree, as each receives the 'nectar' of friendship.

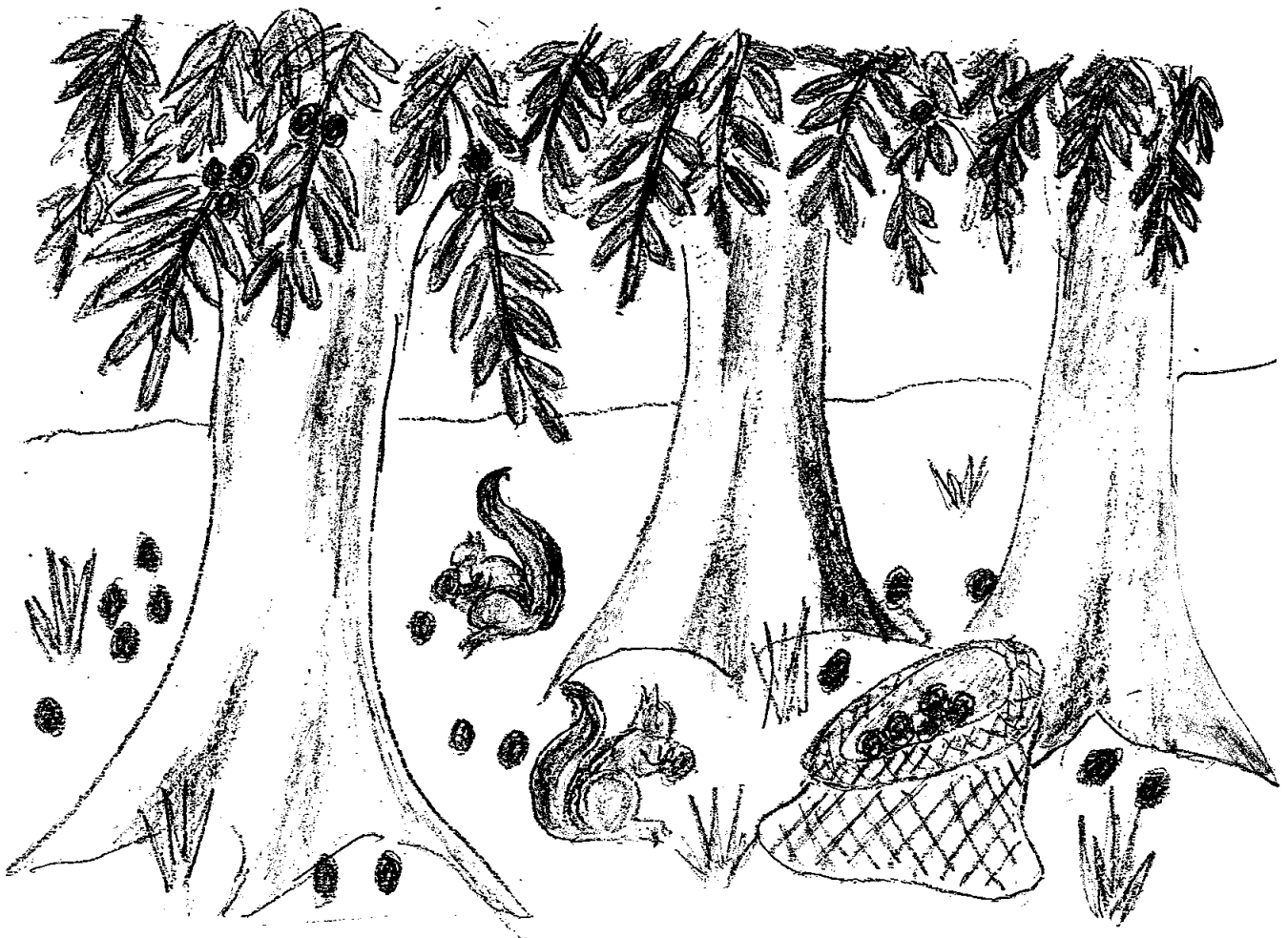
Some of the dreams and plans we held in our childhood have been put aside, much like the blossoms that soon carpet the ground with their loveliness. Tiny fruits will begin forming to face the onslaughts of weather and insects. The mature fruit may have marks that tell us it survived harm from a storm, worm or other harmful event, yet has healed with only the surface scar to tell. Our present attitude and outlook on life may be the result of the buffets and events of our youth that have left a mark or blemish on our soul, destroying the sweetness of life. We can allow the worms of resentment or self-pity to eat at the core of our soul or we can rebuff the discouragements as temporary afflictions, keeping our centers intact. Some may call this being 'thick-skinned', yet in reality it protects the tenderhearted person's deep desire to keep the heart from becoming bitter. Each of us is an apple of God's tree, and He loves each regardless of color, flavor or condition.

I wonder if the apples dream of their future? Wondering if they are the one chosen to be polished to a sheen and lovingly presented to a favorite teacher. Perhaps to be combined with spices and baked within a flaky crust or dumpling, or to become flavorful applesauce or spicy jelly. Even the fruit that may be blemished or misshapen is gathered, not discarded but pressed into that favorite refreshment of autumn, apple cider.

This season let us enjoy the ripening fruits in whatever form we choose, being grateful for the variety and also thankful for those whose care has produced such a wonderful harvest.

BLACK WALNUT

*A tough nut to crack.
Hard shell, sweet pungent center
Waits for us within.*



BLACK WALNUTS

33

I have fond memories of a grove of Black Walnut trees on our farm. An excursion there each fall was an event we looked forward to. We took burlap bags (gunny sacks) to fill. The crisp autumn air and crunchy, fallen leaves added to the magic of the day. We sang our version of a nursery rhyme as "A-nutting we will go..." and danced among the trees picking up the walnuts. Dad would warn, "get out of the way" as he gave hearty shakes to the boughs and the nuts came down. A hit on the head was not welcome. After a time of drying out, the husks had to be removed to reveal a very hard shell that held a rich, sweet nut. One way was hitting them with a hammer, but a more effective way was putting a thin layer of them in the burlap bags and driving a car over them, back and forth until the husks could be shaken off. We found gloves clumsy for this job, yet without them the stain would remain on our hands and fingers for some time. Our ancestors used this as a fabric dye, giving their woven fabrics a rich, mellow brown.

Once the husks were removed, it was time to crack the shells and remove the nutmeat. This was another difficult task. We placed a nut on an anvil, using a hammer to crack it open, remarking on the ability and persistence of squirrels to open them with their sharp teeth. If you are unfamiliar with the pungent, rich flavor of black walnuts, you have a treat in store. Each Christmas we prepared small jars of the nutmeats and homemade fondant as gifts for relatives who anticipated them each year.

The mature trees are harvested for their superb lumber. There is a rich beauty to the grain and fineness of walnut wood. At estate auctions I recall Dad caressing the smooth surface of walnut furniture and proudly bringing it home to be enjoyed for its beauty and usefulness.

There are people we know who have a tough exterior shell that hides a sweet, compassionate heart. This shell may have been formed by hurts sustained in the past, or by the need to possess material things. We read stories of those who survived life's hard knocks; perhaps surviving floods, fires or other of nature's catastrophes to become bereft of all possessions except life and friends. Then with God's grace cracking the hard shell to reveal the sweetness within, begin adding flavor and richness to the lives of others. Just as the trees have value after nut-bearing days to become fine wood to serve another purpose, so may we find other purposes in our life to be of value to the world. Surprises are in store for us when we are open to following a new path of usefulness. Let's be open to the opportunities that may enrich our life and world.

AUTUMN LEAVES

*Fall's panorama.
Hillsides covered with beauty,
Delighting mankind.*



Autumn Leaves

Each fall we look forward to enjoying the glorious panorama of beautiful, colorful hillsides, almost as though the trees were having a 'last fling' before enduring the cold and bitter days ahead.

If we carefully inspect the fallen leaves of a tree, we may notice that few are perfect, yet their combined foliage is lovely. There are blemishes from storms and insects or missing parts that once nourished a caterpillar that later gave flights of pleasure we enjoyed. There are imperfections and losses in our lives, but when we look on the whole of our experiences, we can be aware that all of life's events have blended into a life we enjoy-- the scars healed, the fruits ripening. Just as fallen leaves will enrich the soil, so do the joys and sorrows of our past experiences enrich our present days.

If trees had thoughts, I wonder how they would react to having spent their energies developing the canopies of shade, beauty and fruits only to have autumnal winds tear those leaves from their branches, leaving them bare and unprotected from the coming cold of winter. Would the trees be aware that it is time to rest and that spring will awaken life within for growth and blossoms as spring breezes caress the earth?

There are times when our lives seem full and productive, then an unforeseen event turns our world upside down, leaving us feeling as barren as a winter tree. Where once we felt secure and at peace, a time may come when threatening forces cause our lives to seem as damaged and broken as those fallen leaves being scattered by the wind. In the cold darkness of our 'winter' we can experience God's supporting love and compassion giving hope to waken us to life anew, deepening our appreciation of family, friends and the magnificent world we live in. The day will dawn when we sing a new song of joy as we embrace a promising future.

New seasons await.
May they delight mankind.

CORNUCOPIA

Cornucopia
Symbol of diversity
gathered together.



CORNUCOPIA

Drives along the countryside have been lovely this fall as though the earth had burst into flaming flower. On one drive we came to a rustic farm wagon piled with golden pumpkins and we marveled at the uniformity and sameness of their beauty. A short distance beyond we came to a veritable feast for eyes and senses. A farm produce stand was a picture of diverse color, shape and texture. There were the orange pumpkins; corn with rows of yellow kernels topped by dried husks, much like a young boy's thatch of tousled hair; smooth purple eggplants glistened near red, ripe tomatoes; glossy red and yellow apples nestled near a variety of hard shelled nuts; yellow crooked necked squash cradled a bouquet of broccoli. We sensed a keen awareness of God's creativity in the sweet, spicy, pungent produce!

The gathering of these diverse fruits into a harmonious cluster brought to mind a class of small children and their diversity. Variety not just of size, color or culture, but also their individual traits that the children will learn to accept or to tolerate. The classroom cornucopia of humanity will have the studious, the clown, the challenged, the worrier, the jolly, the bully, the meek, the gifted, the plodder: a more diverse combination of personalities that will seldom be found in many adult groups. It is heartwarming to remember how the children befriended and accepted friendships with one another regardless of their differences.

Our nation is a cornucopia of much diversity. 'Foreign' foods tempt us at mealtimes with exciting tastes and textures. Each nationality and culture adds its special flavor and influence to the creation of a people who acknowledge and embrace the diversity of others, adding depth and richness to life.

Let us celebrate our differences and be thankful that God in His wisdom did not make us copies of each other.

PLUM BLOSSOM

*Symbol of Winter
Flowering in the snow.
Ripening in autumn sun.*



PLUM BLOSSOM

I was introduced to Chinese Brush Painting through Adult Education courses and became fascinated with the Chinese philosophy of attributing qualities to the objects found in nature that surrounded them.

Their symbol for winter is the Plum Blossom that flowers in wintertime. The unexpected beauty and fragrance alert the viewer that all is not bleak. The welcome sight of flowering plum while snow still blankets the earth gives hope and joy to winter weary hearts. Branches are cut to bring pleasure indoors. On the tree the petals will drop, but fruits begin forming and will mature into colorful elliptical plums that bring pleasure to sight, mind and taste—fruits that nourish both soul and body.

It's comforting to recall a friendly greeting and sympathetic hug given during a dark time of life: like a ray of sunshine that helped hope to blossom, and encouraged one to live life each day at a time. Robert Browning said it so well:

*"God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world."*

May we look for and enjoy the beauties of the season expecting our times of bleakness to become bright and fruitful.

GIFTS

“O Great Spirit, my benefactor,
You’ve graced my world with green pastures and flowing waters,
Freed me from my anger, given joy in abundance,
Given dancing feet and song-filled voice.
For this peace-filled day, I am grateful.”



GIFTS

41

The season for gift giving draws near and we begin a flurry of mall visits, purchasing gifts to delight our loved ones. Childhood memories of exchanging homemade gifts with family members bring to mind the pleasure of sensing Grandma's special hug when wearing the scarf she'd knitted. Dressing our dolls in the pretty clothes Mom had stitched, then tucking them into the doll bed that Dad had created, spoke to us of their love and nurtured our growth. We treasure family and friends as special gifts of the heart. Family holiday customs are kept and followed through the years and lead me to wonder about celebrations held in other cultures of long ago. Remembering the story-telling gift of a favorite uncle, I have chosen to write a story that might have taken place once upon a time in a long ago Indian village. I will call it--

MUSINGS OF AN OLD INDIAN.

An old Indian, sitting under his shelter and admiring his garden, notices the drying stalks of corn and trailing vines of squash. He is content to know that the best ears of corn and seeds of squash are safely stored from rodents, ready to be planted in the next season. He watches a nearby cottontail rabbit as it nibbles the tender grass, and further away an antelope passing by. He is filled with wonder at the bounty and the variety of nature that surrounds him from which he has fashioned useful items such as pottery, baskets, tools, food, clothing, and shelter for his use. He has cared for his garden and the surrounding area, taking care that he does no harm to the environment. His heart is filled with gratefulness to the one Who has created all this, and thankfulness wells within him and bursts forth in song and dance. The tribe soon responds to his joy and joins him in this joyous tribute:

*"O Great Spirit, my benefactor,
You've graced my world with green pastures and flowing waters,
Freed me from my anger, given joy in abundance,
Given dancing feet and song-filled voice.
For this peace-filled day, I am grateful.*

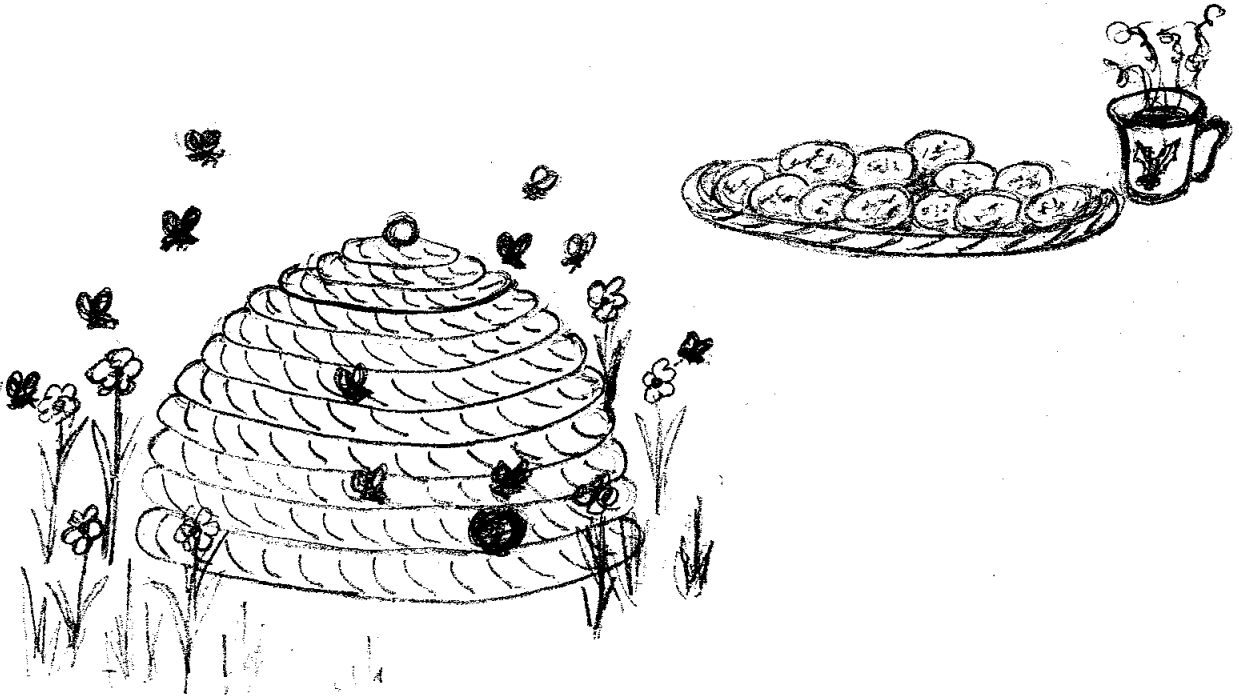
The joyous song of thanksgiving is carried on the air and the delight of the Great Spirit is sensed. Voice is heard, not seen. Their dancing feet leave only traces in the dusty earth. Hearts are filled with a mutual joy of life. There is rejoicing that the Great Spirit gathers their gift of song and dance and a sense of peace enfolds them like a blanket.

While inventing this story, I've been given gifts of insights for which I am thankful. We too are truly appreciative of God's gifts of the earth that sustain life and give us comfort. Using them wisely without depleting our resources is an acknowledgment of our gratefulness. Other insights are that spoken words have no material substance, yet can have substantial effect and lodge in the hearts and minds of another, giving pleasure or distaste to the hearer; and words of comfort and encouragement may be of more value than a dutiful gift without love. William Wordsworth once said, *"The best portion of a good man's life—his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love."* These gifts may be unremembered by the 'doer', but are remembered by the receiver.

*Words and acts in life.
An awesome responsibility.
Help me, Lord, to love.*

HONEY BEES

*Buzzing honeybee.
Our tiny benefactor
Gives sweetness to life.*



HONEY BEES

'Tis the season for holidays; our thoughts quickly turn to preparation. Baking cookies is one prelude to festivities. Honey and spices tempt our senses as we measure, mix and bake. Favorite cookies often have honey as an essential ingredient, so thoughts of honey and the tireless, busy hours the bees have worked to create this sweet, smooth, natural product are brought to mind.

I remember Grandpop donning protective gear hoping to evade the painful stings of aroused bees that were protecting the hive and their store of precious food. He surrounded the hives with smoke to calm the bees before he gathered the trays of honeycomb; always making certain enough was left for the bees' winter sustenance. We were fascinated by his informative tales of the habits of bees, especially about the way the bees danced to communicate where pollen and nectar could be found. We were also impressed as to their industry and dedication to guarding the hives.

Reflecting on the bees' defensive stinger brought to mind the many forms of defense that protect other creatures of the wild. Thankfully, we do not "mirror nature" very well in natural defenses. God did not endow man with such weaponry, but gave him a mind capable of reasoning and great ideas, also a heart for compassion and love. Man was also given the decree to love his neighbor and to be forgiving. God has placed a longing in our hearts for a world of peace and harmony that is central to the seasons' celebrations.

Our desire to share affections and show our love and concern for one another leads us to exchange greetings and gifts with loved ones. Perhaps cookies will be exchanged. Some will be sweetened with the richness of honey that holds the beauty and fragrance of the flowers we admired through the seasons.

May our hearts and senses be filled with the beauty surrounding us to brighten the corner where we are and to flow on into the world to help manifest God's Peace.

Joy, Peace, Love and God's blessing to all.

Holly

*Cheery red berries,
Sharp green leaves so glistening
Symbols of Christmas.*



HOLLY

Each Christmas season we form wreaths from dark green leaves with red berries. We relate the sharp leaves to Christ's crown of thorns and the berries symbolize drops of blood signifying His coming crucifixion. The green, glistening leaves are symbolic of everlasting life.

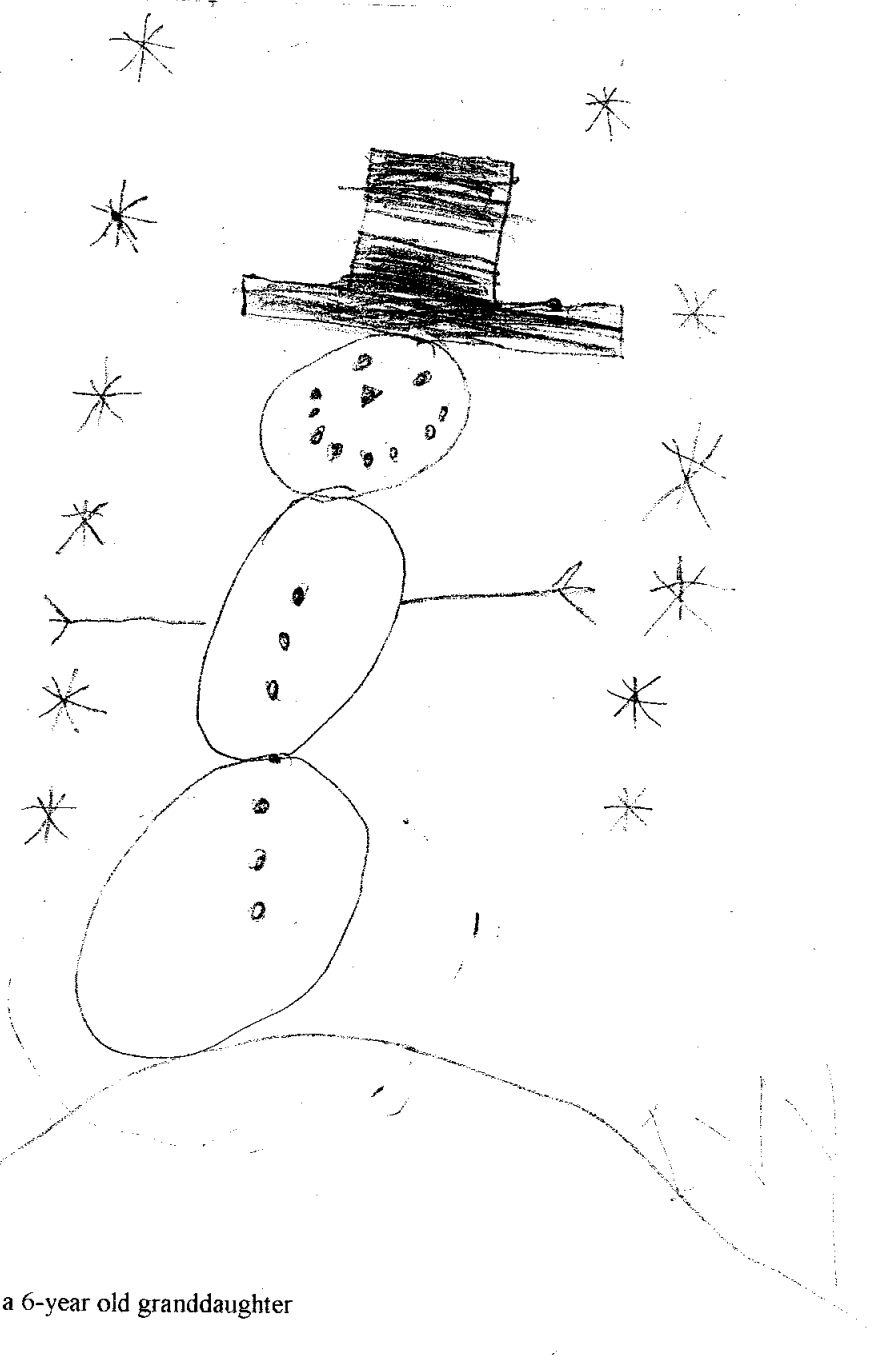
One December I was given sprigs of holly with their cheery red berries and I placed them in a vase of water. Soon after, I was aware of tiny white blossoms opening near the tips. These developed into hard green berries that held promise of ripening into the red fruits of the holly. Soon, fresh new leaves had sprouted at the tip of the old growth. New life growing from the sprigs that were broken from the growing shrub. With only tap water to sustain growth, the sprigs eventually withered and dried.

Just as these sprigs were cut and separated from the life-giving shrub, there are times in our lives when we are separated and cut from what we hold dear and from whom we draw our sustenance. It is at these times that we can choose not to dry up, but to rely on God's living water and find the source of new life that enables us to bloom and eventually bring forth new fruits.

This Christmas season as we hang our holly wreaths, may we be assured that when trials come, there is the hope of the Christmas promise: God's love and presence among us for all time.

SNOWFLAKES

*Glistening snowflakes
Fall silently to our world,
Creating beauty.*



Illustrated by Ivy Ciaburri, a 6-year old granddaughter

SNOWFLAKES

Winter has arrived and we marvel at the symmetry and endless variety of the snowflakes we watch falling so silently around us. It is such a pleasure to watch little children hold a mittened hand to receive them or perhaps extend a willing tongue to capture and enjoy the cold treat.

It is generally believed that no two snowflakes are the same, each created as a unique form. Their individuality is not evident as we view the drifts, the snow-laden branches and the snowmen that have been sculpted by eager, laughing children. Many of these snowflakes have lost bits of their form due to colliding with other flakes while falling in a stormy blizzard, yet their beauty remains.

We too have been created as unique individuals, each with special talents, personalities and goals in life. We know friends who have met adversity and overcame it to become influential in shaping the lives of others. We also may experience storms that reshape us and we adjust our goals and redirect our talents to benefit the world we live in. We join together in families, work and social groups, and in religious congregations to 'sculpt' a better world; changing, being changed much as the snow that was compacted to form the snowman that stands cheerfully for our pleasure.

From a box of tea, I recently saved a quote by Gail Sheehy: "*The present never ages. Each moment is like a snowflake, unique, unspoiled, unrepeatable, and can be appreciated in its surprisingness.*" May we enjoy each other and the beauty of each moment that this winter presents to us. May we know peace, harmony and good will in the coming new year.

SONGSTER

*You've stitched scallops in the air-
Blessed our ears with happy trill-
Come now, friendly one, eat your fill.*

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WINTER BIRDS

Snow covers the bleak and drab landscape. The barren trees allow sunlight to filter through the branches onto glistening snow, inviting us to play. To enjoy winter fun, we bundle into layers of clothing to ward off the chill, and are grateful for a cup of hot chocolate and indoor warmth after the invigorating outdoor fun. While enjoying that cup of hot chocolate we may look outside and marvel at the birds that visit the feeders. We wonder at their cheerful demeanor in the wintry cold—they have no boots to protect their spindly legs, yet they hop about unaffected by the cold, and where do they find warmth through the dark of night?

We like the blue jay's lovely flash of color as they snatch peanuts before the frisky squirrels lay claim to them. There's the brightness of the cardinals as they crack sunflower seeds and add cheer to the scene. We watch the downy woodpecker pecking at the suet ball for its energy. The perky juncos and sparrows are favorites as are the chickadees as they call to one another. We look in vain for the pheasants that came daily last winter for the cracked corn. Each of the birds is favored with its own characteristics and needs, a reflection of the creativity and care that God has provided for each.

We too have a variety of friends and acquaintances that bring color and cheer to the lives of others and ourselves. At times we need one another for various reasons and will respond with help through dark times to warm hearts and lift spirits.

Enjoy the varied beauty of each season of the year. Also, enjoy family and friends who bring joy and meaning to your life, as you add to theirs.

THE HORSE

*Swift, strong and gentle,
Benefactor of Mankind.
Equine beauty reigns.*



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THE HORSE

For centuries the horse has been the accepted mode of travel, of transportation of goods and as a status symbol. The horse continues to be the source of power in many areas of the world today. The rider and horse enjoy companionship as they travel over the smooth and the rough terrains of their lonely journeys.

The wild horses on the western plains are admired as they exhibit the freedom to play, race and bond together as a herd. Their flying manes and tails exhibit their wilderness spirit. When a wild horse is captured and trained by a caring, patient trainer, it can become a gentle, trusting animal friend, its magnificence exhibited as it responds to the riders' commands. Rather than using the whip to instill fear as a way to control behavior, a wise horse-trainer encourages and rewards good behavior with words of praise, an apple or other treat. A horse's early training is reflected in its mature behavior, just as children who have known love, acceptance and encouragement will become adults with those characteristics. They will have the confidence and vision to explore their dreams—enriching our lives with their creativity in science, the arts, statesmanship, invention, or wherever their God-given talent leads them.

As horses once helped 'conquer' the West, now some are helping handicapped children conquer their fears and build confidence, trust and joy. Properly trained horses will exhibit a patient, gentle manner as these children sit astride them. They will gingerly accept a proffered treat that the hesitant child holds out. These children respond by expanding their own personalities with new hopes and desires and the ability to trust their response to a life of physical limitations; understanding that there are facets of their being that can grow, develop and enrich the world.

We respond to love and will trust those who support us in our growth and who help shape our lives, our actions and goals. When influenced by love and understanding we usually model our behavior in a like manner and become free to be patient, inspired persons. As we become aware of ways and opportunities to encourage our youth and others, we realize that our own behavior has become modified in wonderfully enriching ways. So, admire the horse and know that we too can be 'Benefactors of Mankind'.

PINE TREE

*Known as 'Dragon Tree',
Sheltering creatures of the wild.
Sturdy, ancient pine.*



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THE PINE TREE

A quote from a book on Chinese Brush Painting, The Mustard Seed Garden, says, *“Pine trees are like people of high principles whose manner reveal an inner power. They resemble young dragons coiled in deep gorges; they have an attractive, graceful air, yet one trembles to approach them for fear of the hidden power ready to spring forth.”* The pine tree has as its nickname: Dragon Tree. The dragon is not considered evil by the Chinese. It is feared and respected for its benevolence and watchfulness and is a necessary creature in Chinese New Year celebrations. The dragon represents the world emerging from the darkness of winter with the promise of new beginnings.

When we look at a pine tree's shape, much of its early life can be imagined. Broken branches and stunted growth are visible signs of the storms it has weathered, and always we can notice the uplifted branches. Snows will have weighed the branches down through the winter, yet they turn upward in a grand affirmation of life and victory over the winter storms that were endured. The Chinese admire the ability of the pine trees to survive on mountaintops. Often they are the only trees to withstand the severe weather.

Artists often paint them situated on rocky heights, their roots clinging and penetrating the mountainside with tenacity, growing deep and strong, denoting moral principles. As the tree reaches upward for light to grow above the surrounding darkness of the forest floor, the lower branches wither and die. Past growth is shed, not held onto where it would draw strength from the new growth as the tree stretches for light. The scar is likened to the eye of the dragon, denoting the wisdom of past experiences.

The bark of a pine tree is rough and harsh to the touch but perfect for the protection it provides. The needles of the pine look sharp, yet are soft to the touch-feathery soft. Birds and squirrels find safe havens in the branches just as we often find a soft heart and comforting presence in a person we first viewed as rough and sharp. Pine trees are a symbol of long life. The aged are respected for their inner beauty, experience, wisdom, mercy, and open-mindedness, having survived many trials. Among your friends are those who mirror the pine tree's qualities. Think of them, treasure them, and rejoice in the diversity with which our Creator has surrounded us.