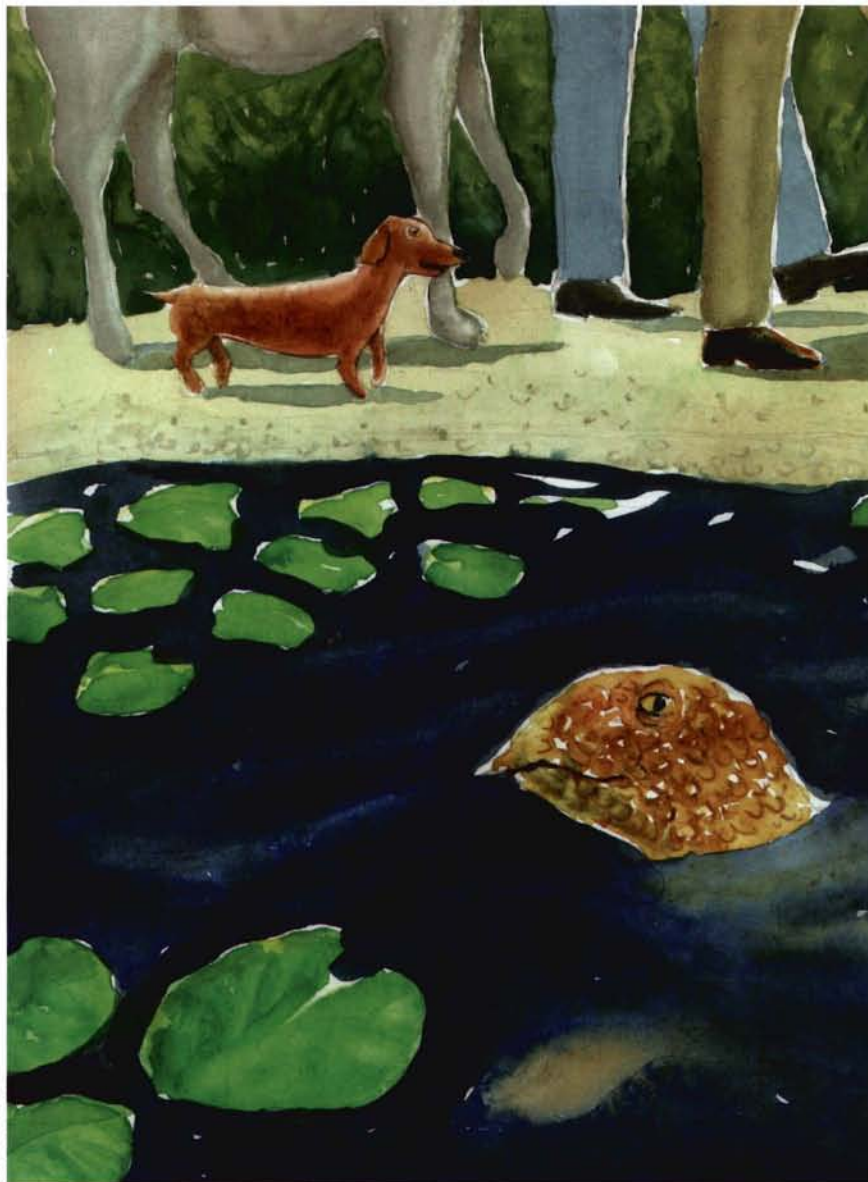


In Praise of Pletcher's Pond



SUSAN SANFORD

TWICE A DAY, BETWEEN rounds of writing, my wife, Lorry, and I walk around our pond. Pletcher's Pond. That was the name of the man who dug into the amber sand, piling it up and watching with pleasure as the spring that fed the cavity with clear green

water bubbled forth and made one of the largest ponds on Pine Island. After all these years, the water has darkened to the depthless, infinite shimmer of molasses. Add lily pads, chimeras of white punk wood saplings, turtleheads like periscopes, and you've got the picture.

Now, pitch in two Great Danes, moving in bovine grace among the straw grasses. Put in a dachshund, too, one not much larger than a mouse (in fact, she's named Mouse) and sprinkle in one soft-footed snowshoe Siamese cat. Now stir it up with finches, warblers and thrashers. Throw in some fish crows, eagles and ospreys. And don't forget to add the gray squirrels and rice rats that love to devil the dogs. That's the whole boiling beauty of it, the daily circus that is our own back yard.

I forgot to mention the black racers. One of these silky serpents stands up to our Great Dane, Hilary. She looks at it and kills it with a quick shake of the head. I do not hang the limp snake on the fence as the old farmers used to do, so as to coax rain out of the clouds. But I do toss it over the fence. In a few hours, the four-foot reptile is plucked bone clean by a confluence of vultures.

At dusk, Lorry and I and the gang go round the pond again. A soft-shelled turtle is laying eggs under a palm tree. The Danes close in. The

frightened turtle retracts into its shell. I drive off the barking dogs, raise the heavy creature up. Then I deposit it into Pletcher's Pond. The turtle hits the water like a flats boat, then zooms off like a high-powered cigarette cruiser. With so many softies living in the water, and with one alligator snapping turtle emerging, giant-headed, from time to time, I wonder why I like swimming in Pletcher's Pond so much. But I do. Mr. Pletcher ate cooter; I do not. Maybe that's why I'm not unnerved swimming in the midst of turtles. I have good karma with them, proven by the fact I can still wiggle 10 toes.

Now the sun lays down its last lingering butter-warm rays on the dark

Seeing our Danes and dachsy, noses glued to the ground as they sip, drink and suck it all in, we know we're missing something of the miraculous.

glitter of Pletcher's Pond. The soft Gulf wind lifts the lily pads revealing their purple, pan-sized tummies. A few lilac-tinted lilies still gleam in the afterglow of early evening.

We walk on as our dogs sniff on. I wonder what it might be like having a dog's nose. There's a world of sensate storytelling denied to human schnozzes. We cannot imagine the odoriferous dimensions of canine sniffer power. But seeing our Danes and dachsy, noses glued to the ground as they sip, drink and suck it all in, we know we're missing something of the miraculous.

We admire a tall slash pine, one of the straightest, tallest of these on our property. Hurricane Charley hurt it. Then a family of downy woodpeckers moved into it. "One

day," I say to my wife, "that tree's going to come down with a crash."

There is no end of things to think about on this property, so I decide to take a nap and not think about anything. Lying on the couch with at least one Great Dane and a dachsy wrapped around me, I think one last thought: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it ... and that thought leads me to quantum physics and Schrödinger's cat. You must remember that ill-fortuned feline in the metal box. Not a real cat, of course, a conundrum cat. Anyway, the cat's in the box and can't get out. Schrödinger's formula calls for some acid that may or may not drip on the cat depending on whether a certain number of atoms decay in the lid of the canister that contains the acid. Does the cat in the box live or die? That is the question, or nonquestion, if you prefer.

And that's the quandary of modern physics.

It doesn't know and doesn't care.

In truth, science cannot know.

And that's the rub for modern man.

What do we do?

Take a nap and forget about it.

I drift off among the immemorial snakeskins, immaterial cats and celestial, woodpeckered pine trees. Unable to solve anything, I dream.

In my dream, I whirl above the world like a woodpecker looking for a home. In fact, I am a pileated woodpecker. "Why would anyone want to live in this empty nest?" I ask in the hollow wood of a dead pine tree. "This crummy apartment is coming down."

I awake to the sound of a sonic boom. The ground quavers.

Rubbing my eyes, I step outside. It's that twilight pause between day's slow, slipping ebb and evening's immeasurable return.

I get a funny little twinge when I see that the old familiar woodpecker pine is down. Missed the pool by a couple of feet.

A half-bent, smiling moon rises over Pletcher's Pond.

I stare at the segmented pieces of rotten wood at my feet. A corpse of pine. I can see inside its dry rot and beetle-eaten belly. Forget about the tree falling in the forest and no one hearing it. I heard it, all right. Even in my sleep, I heard it. I glance from the body of the dead tree to the black mirror of Pletcher's Pond. Now there's a mystery that can't be solved. That pond. Why do I love looking at it so much?

Lorry joins me by the tree. She too enjoys meditating by still waters.

If you can't fix a fallen tree or plumb the mysterious depths of Pletcher's Pond—what can you do? You can go to Matlacha and have a mullet sandwich.

"Would you like to go to Matlacha and eat a mullet sandwich?" I ask her.

She nods and says, "I'd love to."

If you can't fix a fallen tree, if you can't save Schrödinger's cat or plumb the mysterious depths of Pletcher's Pond—what can you do?

You can go to Matlacha and have a mullet sandwich.

Not just any mullet sandwich. The best mullet sandwich in the world. While eating it, I thank God for the many beauties of mullet, turtle, shell, sand, dog, cat, bird and pine. Yes, this is my silent prayer—for all the things I can do nothing about, I say my common prayer in praise of this extraordinary spot of land where the road ends and the water begins. This place that gives us more heavensight than hindsight, more mysticism than a quantum cat can handle. †

Pine Island Soundings won a first-place award for Best Column from the Florida Magazine Association last year, and it also won a City and Regional Magazine Association award this year.