Literature and Research Writing

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I'm a little leery about our invoking the term "literature" here.

Not that I don't love literature. Unlike our president- "elect," I love to read. Books. Of all kinds. Unlike his choice for national security adviser, I wasn't forced to read so many books as a kid that I lost this love. No, my parents had to pry the books out of my hands and shove me outside once in a while, into the sunlight.

But the term "literature" brings me terrifying flashbacks from graduate school. There are only a couple of things that got me through graduate school. One was a friend who was even more crazy about riding his bicycle over the local mountains than I was. And the other was Matt Groening's comic strip, "Life in Hell," the weekly reading of which convinced me that there were plenty of others who had survived exactly this kind of torture.

There's one stanza from "Life in Hell," in fact, that I think holds up as a kind of literature itself. It is declaimed, if I remember right, by a pretty run-down looking student-slash-rabbit named Bongo, who is slumped behind his desk:

> My name is little Bongo
> I sing my little song-o
> And every time I raise my hand
> The teacher says I'm wrong-o.

The other thing I don't like about the term "literature" is what happens when I start thinking—while I'm supposed to be writing—about being literary, instead of about telling a story. First of all, nothing happens. Second, if something does happen, I end up wishing it hadn't, because it's something that sickens me with its falseness, carries me farther away from who I am. I did receive one valuable piece of advice about writing in graduate school. It was a line typed out on a scrap of paper that was taped above the desk of my adviser, a successful professional writer who had no college degree. It said: "Don't dress. Come as you are."

All things considered, then, I would rather talk about good writing than about literature. Good writing can come from anywhere. It stuns me, wakes me up, wherever I see it.

I was recently surprised to find a paragraph of graceful prose on the back of a tin of curry powder. They write a beautiful English in Bangalore. The buzz of joy I felt when I read that bit of copy reminded me that a simple, graceful sentence improves the world a little bit. Like Martha Stewart says, it's a good thing.

Two years ago a similar thing happened when I bought a headlamp for my bike. The writing on the instruction sheet for this simple device was so good—so clear, so logically organized, so flush with care for both its subject and its reader—that I wrote an e-mail to the company. A fan letter. "This person is doing great work for you," I wrote. "You should pay her more money."

The e-mail bounced back to me.

Sic semper scriptoris. Once, at a reception during a meeting of science writers, a guy came up to me and said, "I read your stuff in the latest issue. It's good." I said thanks. He said, "I mean it's really well-written." I said thanks. He said, "You spent a lot of time working on that." I said, "Yeah, too much time." And he said, "I don't mean to be rude, but where does it get you?"

He was a nice guy, a young guy, from a science background. He was looking for career advice. What am I supposed to tell this guy? That I'm trying to do my part to improve the world? That on a good day it's like flying?

On a bad day it's like writing and I are the Defiant Ones. We're shackled together by the ankles. We want to kill each other. But we need each other. No that isn't true. I need him. Literature—all those books—is the iron that binds us together. I'm like Marley's ghost: I wear the chain I forged in life.

And wear it gladly. I just keep on adding links. I need to read in order to write. I need to read paragraphs like this:

> Most of the small basement was filled with a freezer, which my mother, one in a long line of carefully organized women, kept always filled as a hedge against catastrophe. (Distantly, my mother's voice at the bottom of the stairs: "Shut the freezer!"—trailing off into words I didn't bother to hear.) Its heavy white lid seemed to lift from the stiff latch with relief, and swing up so that a waft of the freezer's queer fog blew in my face... The ancient grass skirt my father brought home from the war hung on one wall, its clackety tendrils yellow with age. He kept a safe there, too, tucked inside a rough cavity torn by hammers from the cement foundation. Here were the dusty boxes of Christmas tree lights, the empty jam jars, a bike frame, a trunk, the lethal table saw I was never to touch. My silences were sometimes the silence of the lost, the wandering, but they could be deliberate and ungiving, too. I would lean on a post beside the freezer and fade half away from the world gazing at my father's old toy train, wrecked against a tiny hillside.

That's Sallie Tisdale, the essayist. And yeah, it wakes me up. The rhythm, first of all. The sharpness and sensory quality of the detail. Tisdale teaches me the difference the exactly right word can make, the unobvious word that is nevertheless perfect in both rhythm and meaning. This paragraph reminds me of the richness possible in descriptive language. It also challenges me to see, and to remember—and to realize that really noticing anything is no insignificant thing. That's one way reading literature has affected me.

Here's another paragraph I like:

> I saw my first tick in the back yard of a rented house in East Hampton, on the oceanic East End of Long Island, one afternoon in July of 1949. It was on my wife's back. We had just come home from

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> the beach, and the tick was conspicuously poised on the bare skin between the top and the bottom of her two-piece bathing suit. We had only recently moved east from Missouri, where the insect pest of summer is not the tick but the chigger. Still, I knew what a tick looked like, and I knew—or had heard—that there was an approved way of removing one from the flesh of its victim: apply the lighted end of a cigarette. I had a cigarette in my hand (as I often did in those innocent days), and I carefully applied the lighted end to my wife's nicely tanned back. She gave a scream. The tick did not, as the approved method promised, drop to the ground. It merely crawled a millimeter or two to the right. Instinct guided me next. I reached out and plucked it off with my thumb and forefinger. Before I killed it, before I crushed it with a pebble, I took a closer look. It was almost the size of a ladybug, only flat, with a shiny brown carapace and a yellowish capelike collar. It had eight spindly legs and a tiny snout of a head. It was ugly, but it looked—though I knew it wasn't—harmless.

This is the *New Yorker* writer Berton Roueche, starting out a story on lyme disease. Roueche is not a guy who was inclined to the baroque. Next to Tisdale, he's practically Joe Friday.

What I like about the paragraph, in addition to the easy balance, the understated humor, the precise informality, the careful description, the un-rushed rolling-out of a fully fleshed, vivid anecdote, is that it was written by somebody who could be called a science writer.

Roueche, who died just a couple of years ago, used to write a feature called "Annals of Medicine." His specialty was epidemiology, the tracking of disease oubreaks to their sources. In the wrong hands, it can be pretty dry stuff. If you've ever read the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, put out by the Centers for Disease Control, you know what I'm talking about.

Roueche's bright idea was that these were human stories. He conceived of them as mysteries. It seems like an obvious idea, but this was long before Richard Preston wrote *The Hot Zone*. Roueche's mysteries weren't of the white-knuckle variety, either. His most famous title was a book called *Eleven Blue Men*, about an outbreak of sodium-nitrite poisoning that was meticulously traced to a Bowery soup kitchen.

Berton Roueche went around talking to physicians and biochemists and public health officers and patients and he wrote stories out of what they told him. Not articles, not interviews. Compelling narratives. And he even put himself into them sometimes.

What reading Roueche, and Jeremy Bernstein, and Diane Ackerman, and John McPhee, and Malcolm Gladwell, and Sue Hubbell—and, closer to home, Roger, and Nancy, and others—has taught me is that writing about science, about research, is—or should be—simply writing. There's no wall there to hide behind, or to be thwarted by. There's no separate formula. Anything goes. These are stories for the telling.

And it's okay to be part of the story. I am part of the story, in fact. Whether I use the first person or not. Whether I like it or not. Whether I am aware of it or not.

John Steinbeck had something to say about this. Steinbeck studied marine biology at Stanford in the 1930s, and in 1941, he wrote a book called *The Sea of Cortez*, about a research trip in the Gulf of California, undertaken with his friend the biologist Ed Ricketts. It's a shaggy omnibus of a book, lots of color plates and drawings and taxonomic descriptions smack up against a substantial narrative that is about equal parts marine science, teleological speculation, and drunken escapade. A wonderful book. Not the sort of book that could easily get published today. But in the apologia that begins it, Steinbeck writes this:

> We wanted to see everything our eyes would accommodate, to think what we could, and, out of our seeing and thinking, to build some kind of structure in modeled imitation of the observed reality. We knew that what we would see and record and construct would be warped, first, by the collective pressure and stream of our time and race, second by the thrust of our individual personalities. But knowing this, we might not fall into too many holes—we might maintain some balance between our warp and the separate thing, the external reality… It is good to know what you are doing.

Reading literature helps me to know what I am doing.

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