

Food and Water Beetles and Rats

I Read

To be a student of biology, for at least these past fifteen years,
and likely lifelong from now hence, I read.

Books are ever at my bedside.

Books are carried faithfully, just in case there is a moment to read,
in the car, even when just running errands.

I enjoy reading Lewis Thomas.

He calls himself a biology watcher.

He is, of course, a very well informed biology watcher.

He writes in brief episodes.

He writes about widely varied phenomena of the biological world.

Within each episode, there is an informative and entertaining structure.

There is a progression.

The direction of his books are like a walk in the wilderness, sometimes up,
sometimes down, through meadows, clear spaces,
where one's attention is either on the vista or the blades of grass -
all a matter of scale and the promptings of the environment.

Sometimes he is off through the woods, where life within
and between the patches on the shaded forest floor calls your attention
to holes in the earth and songs in the air.

Lewis Thomas wrote The Lives of a Cell.

This venture in biology through entertaining and informative books
is one part of the exploration of biology.

The methodical sweep of the Eighth Day of Creation,
an historical account of biology as a path of scientific discovery,
provides contrast to the whims and episodes of Thomas,
the wonder of Lyall Watson's books,
or the science news of Scientific American, New Scientist,
Science Digest, Discovery or Omni.

I Enjoy Learning

I enjoy learning that many newly hatched birds do not know how to sing.

I can find myself in complete sympathy with male zebra finches
who just listen the first twenty or thirty days of their lives.

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By such listening, and their trials at singing,
nerves are formed between the brain and vocal muscles.

I Laughed

Now I find myself intrigued by a walk to the stream at the foot of the hill behind:
my home, my study, my office, all the same,
because my office is simply across the valley from my home,
above the same stream.

At the same time, I remember how my daughter
wondered why I laughed when I read the news
that the museums in Great Britain were having trouble
with beetles eating the specimens.

She asked why I laughed.

It was also reported that seventy percent of the museums
in the United Kingdom didn't have a biologist on staff.
They didn't know what to do about beetles.

To Explain

To explain why I laughed:

That story about beetles makes me recall
visiting Arabia, Saudi Arabia, on the Red Sea
and finding myself standing in the entrance hall
of a rather austere, but new building.

It was late at night.

I had only arrived at 9:30 p.m. for my first visit to Saudi Arabia.

A woman, in dark veils and bare feet, rushed in,
able to speak very few words of English.

She said only two words, "help, come" and reached out her hand
poised to rush off through an archway.

I followed.

Perhaps thirty paces down the corridor she opened a door and pointed.

I was astonished.

All along one wall, sixteen to eighteen feet long, on the floor,
were stacks, three deep, fifteen inches high, stacks of money, U.S. dollars.

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The problem was a cluster of rodents of a variety not familiar,
but smaller rats of some kind.
They were mutilating the money, apparently eating it.
She squealed in dismay.

I asked if there was a kitchen. Is there food?
I pointed to my open mouth. She caught on.
She immediately dashed off.
In less than a minute she returned with some bread and some oranges.
She squeamishly handed them to me and stood back
while I broke the loaf of bread and offered it
as an alternative to tempt away the swarming creatures.
I created a trail that led to the door.
Then I stood shrugging my shoulders,
asking what direction in which I should lead
this host of hungry creatures.
She opened a door three paces down and across the hall,
went through and opened another door into a courtyard of some kind,
I trailed the bread along the way
and dropped the broken oranges on the tile paving in the courtyard.
They followed.

She bowed, uttered sounds I couldn't understand,
then escorted me back to the front entrance,
she left me standing for some fifteen minutes
and returned with a young man who spoke English.
She spoke to him without my understanding what was being said
and he progressively smiled, grinned, looked at me,
extended his hand for a hand shake
and invited me into an office off the entrance
in the opposite direction.

The Wells in Mecca Were Dry

He admired and appreciated my thinking in getting the animals out of the room.
Then he sheepishly explained that the banks in Beirut had been blown up
and the banks in England wouldn't accept the money on deposit
until they had someone to borrow it.

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They hadn't found anyone yet.
So they decided to buy something they needed: water.
All the wells in Mecca were dry.

I Wrote It All Down

Certainly I understood that animals need food, that people need water.
Beetles need food, even museum beetles,
 and no one was going to feed them deliberately,
 but the museum did want to preserve their collections.
So with this rush of memories and this association,
 I laughed at reading about the beetles in the museum,
 but I really couldn't explain it to my daughter, at the moment,
 so I wrote it all down, for her and for you.