

A READER'S JOURNEY

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Third Place, Creative Non-Fiction

Although my memory is an unreliable source, I do not recall reading while in utero. I would have, I am certain of this, had there been any material and enough light. I must have relied on intimate communication with my twin, my never born companion; when she died before birth, did I absorb her essence? Is that why I have always felt that a part of me-is it she-was looking on? She, the quiet, formless one who transcends the limitations of place, of appearance, and of time and I, the reader and the writer. I have always felt this symbiotic duality of consciousness: one immanent, one transcendent, both essential. It is what enables me to be simultaneously in the world and observing it.

Language in all her permutations of form has been omnipresent in my life. At first she was just a tantalizing concoction of singing and accents, of meaning and sound. My mother's side of the family, immigrants and poor, thought formal education was akin to sloth. In their world, a strong back was the means to survival; if you could carry hod or chop wood you could feed your family. Paradoxically, they were gifted storytellers, a fortuitous byproduct of inherent intelligence and illiteracy. As a child I would sit in their midst and listen to them recount the tales of my great-grandfather who won a month's wages lifting a grown man seated in a chair with one hand, how Uncle Fidel jumped from a standing position into an oak barrel, or how my great-grandmother walked home from the tuberculosis sanatorium to kiss her children and die in her own bed. They sang songs in words I did not recognize and when the songs made them cry, I cried, too.

Speech came to me early on as if a magic wand of words had been waved over my head, and it transformed my world into something tangible, expressible, and understandable. Although our family lore has expanded to fill many volumes, stories of my early language skills still are told at holiday dinners and, now the most common time for the family to assemble, at funerals. The most wonderful result of language, however, was the revelation of another source of that most delightful of sensations: laughter. My family is uncommonly, unabashedly, and, some would say, inappropriately witty. Example: my grandfather, 89, has endured a quintuple bypass, a stroke, pneumonia, lung cancer, and a blood clot. At his most recent visit to the emergency room the doctor asked, "What's the problem?" and my grandfather, lying pale and in pain on the gurney said, "I don't know. I keep kicking the bucket but it won't tip over."

My father was the aberration in his own immigrant family, the recipient of a college scholarship. There is a collection on my bookshelf of the Great Books series that he bought when I was four years old. He bought it because either: 1) he wanted to fill in the gaps in his education, which consisted mostly of classes such as Wave Theory, and Electromagnetic Currents, (the result of that four year scholarship having been awarded to study engineering), or 2) he was a compassionate sucker for anyone who peddled with aplomb. In those days we lived in Ohio in a little brick house indistinguishable from our neighbors' little brick houses in a neighborhood where peddlers could easily find receptive buyers. It was wonderful entertainment for our mostly television-deprived neighborhood: sales pitches for everything from brushes to

encyclopedias to vacuum cleaners to the Great Books series, incongruously bound in pink and black. (Aristotle in pink?) A salesman himself, my father loved to make someone work for the sale, asking questions such as “Can knowledge be contained in a set of books?”, “Who decides what is great?”, “What is the difference between need and want? Do I need more dishes? In what sense?” He really did ask questions like that, and not just to the unwary peddler. If, however, the peddler was uncommonly enthusiastic and engaging, my father would always buy as a way of showing encouragement and appreciation for a job well done and which is how we came to own the entire nine volume course.

Sometimes I take one off the shelf and hold it, recalling the memory of my father reading in the evening. When he came home from work, my sister and I were allowed to meet him at the top of the hill and he would let us sit on his lap and drive home. It was two blocks for him, cross-country for us. He would enter the house with his mysterious briefcase and wearing his rumpled “holy white shirts,” as we called them, which my mother ironed every evening, dipping her fingers in a bowl of water and sprinkling them to soften the fibers. He would mix his first drink of the evening (Manhattans for years, Scotch and Sodas for awhile, Scotch and Water briefly, Scotch on the Rocks until the end). We would eat dinner and then all sit in the living room. My sister and brother and I would color or look at books or fight with each other as he read. Because he had a bad back, my father would lie on the floor to read and I would often stretch out on his back and look over his shoulder at the cryptic symbols, willing them to divulge their meaning. Occasionally he would sigh or laugh and say, *Listen to this!* and I would lay my head against his back and listen to the words resonating in his body: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” or, “Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog....” I understood none of it, but the sound was enough to make me want to rip the pages from the book and eat them.

I could not wait to go to school to be taught to read so I made my mother teach me. I painstakingly copied the alphabet with a fat pencil sharpened with a knife, associated the letters with sounds, put them in order to form small words and then searched out the words in the funny papers. Before long, my world palpably expanded. I felt the thrill throughout my body when I looked at words and they spoke to me. It was as if winds of words filled the slack sails of my childhood and I set off on a never-ending journey as a reader.

And indeed the journey has not ended. My bookshelves overflow, the side of my bed resembles a lending library, there are books in my car and in my purse, I give books as gifts, I lend books compulsively. But most importantly, I am who I am because I am a reader. Reading destroyed boundaries in my life before they had a chance to be erected. Reading exploded the limitations of time, forming a new dimension in which I exist, will exist, and have existed. Reading gave me community when I had none (I was the “new kid” in eight different schools), let me savor loneliness, affirmed my right to an askew point of view, and threw me a wheel when I sat by the road, trying to invent one. It has expedited my understanding of myself and of others and, best of all, it has made me a writer.

