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Under the Rug, or a Plea for the Lighter Touch

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Reading and writing the dry, dispassionate texts of today's scientific discourse invokes nostalgia for the anecdotal accounts of the 19th century: "On the occasion of a recent visit to A--, Dr. R--, traveling on the same train with me, mentioned to me a conjecture concerning the behavior of laminar flow"

There is something fascinating and very human about the incidental, irreproducible part of a scientific study which is usually purged -- the serendipitous encounters of everyday life that influence the way a concept is formed in one's mind; the appearance of a problem-solving *gestalt* in a dream; the apple that falls from a tree; the hits and misses of the everyday work; the quarrels with colleagues; the struggles with students to make them mean what they say and say what they mean in the draft; the embarrassing discussions about the sequence of authors (which could be avoided, incidentally, by listing them all in a circular fashion). An article that intends to preserve the richness of the experience leading from the conception of an experiment to the messy results and their interpretation would do well by going beyond "Materials and Methods," by including a section entitled "Personals and Problems" or even "Under the Rug."

As one who tries to balance his life in science by the pursuit of fiction writing and photography, I'm always delighted when I encounter an article in *Nature* about such esoteric subjects as the fractal properties of paintings by Jackson Pollock (which changed in the course of his life), or the forces that cause the shower curtain to move (counter-intuitively: inwards). The editors of some scientific journals, apparently feeling the same fact-fatigue, have switched to covers that reflect art and other non-scientific realms: van Gogh-style renderings of protein complexes (Nature Structural and Molecular Biology), or have abandoned scientific subjects altogether (EMBO Journal).

Considering what struggles we have gone through, starting from Medieval Times, to arrive at today's standards of scientific discourse, sentiments for even an inch of retrograde move seem risky, especially at a time when other, sinister Medieval practices are coming back in fashion. I think what I have in mind, rather, is a lighter touch, the Judith-Reiffel touch for those who remember Elmar Zeitler's late administrative assistant, who used to put a stamp with four dancing pigs under her signature in her *Ultramicroscopy* correspondence (Fig. 1), and managed to fake an abstract so convincingly (on the invention of a novel microscope that uses light instead of electrons!) that it was accepted and printed in the Proceedings of the Electron Microscopy Society of America. A lightness that carries a reflection of serendipity that comes with the pursuit of science.

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Fig. 1.
Four dancing pigs, under an acceptance note dated September 11, 1992 by Judith Reiffel, working for Elmar Zeitler, then Editor of *Ultramicroscopy*.