

# Flying High

by Theodore Dalrymple (January 2015)

Just over twelve years ago, I was waiting outside a court to give my evidence in a case of murder. There was another expert witness outside waiting to give his evidence, too, and we fell to talking. I explained what I did, and asked him what he did.

'Oh,' he said of himself dismissively, 'I'm just a fly man.'

I am ashamed to say that until then I not only knew nothing of forensic entomology, I did not even know that such a subject existed. It had never occurred to me that the insect fauna found on a body might help to detect the perpetrator of a crime. Like so many ignorant people I had supposed that a maggot was a maggot, a repellent manifestation of Nature's malignity. My interlocutor enlightened me in a most charming and entertaining manner, though the subject was not one to please an aesthete.

In fact, he was a crucial witness in the case because much turned on the time of death of the victim and this could be estimated sufficiently accurately by the maggots and other insects that had been found on his body. This was not quite a straightforward matter, for the succession of insects that feed on a body depends on many factors, but once these are taken into account, the time of death can be established by such evidence with reasonable certainty.

All this was completely unknown to me – as unknown as the American continent was to Ferdinand and Isabella. It opened a fascinating and previously unsuspected vista to me; I could happily have listened to the forensic entomologist for hours. He had that happy knack of communicating his enthusiasm without being in the least overbearing or superior, or condescending because of the other person's – that is to say, my – ignorance. Though he had been in the field for many years, it had lost none of its wonder for him; he was proofed against cynicism.

Alas, he was called all too soon into court to give his evidence, which I did not hear, and I did not meet him again. But by coincidence, I received about two weeks later a letter from Dr Zakaria Erzinçlioğlu enthusiastically praising an article that I had written under my *nom de plume*. I realised at once that it was he whom I had met shortly before at the court, for he mentioned in the letter that he was a forensic entomologist (not a common profession), though he did not realise that he had met me.

I replied at once, thanking him for his flattering remarks, and told him that we had actually

met shortly before. I hoped, in fact, that we might become friends, for I had seldom met so attractive a personality, expansive without egotism, an obvious enthusiast for the world about him. It was (I surmised) impossible to be in his company without learning a great deal.

I did not hear back from him and about a week later I opened my newspaper – to this day I love the sensation of opening a physical newspaper, a pleasure that no screen will ever give me – to see an obituary of him. He had died, aged 50, of a heart attack.

I was not only shocked but grieved by the news, so completely unexpected. To this day I cannot think of him – and I think of him surprisingly often – without a stab of grief.

Dr Erzinçlioğlu, known to his professional colleagues as Dr Zak, was a remarkable man. He was born in Hungary in 1952, and spent much of his childhood in the Sudan and Egypt. I thought it likely (though I do not know) that his parents were diplomats, and he was obviously of Turkish descent; at any rate he studied zoology in England and specialised in entomology. Apparently he became interested in the forensic aspects of his subject when one day the police came to him and asked him whether he could help in their investigations of a murder. From then on he did not look back.

He was on the verge of larger fame when he died, and I think he had the kind of personality that would not have been spoiled by it. He had published an entertaining book about his forensic cases, *Maggots, Murder and Men*, and had appeared on television. He was cultivated, with an interest in literature; he was an admirer of Sherlock Holmes and had published a short story in a collection of Holmes stories by contemporary writers. His first book was called *Blowflies*, a handbook of these generally despised insects (bluebottles and greenbottles among them) whose larvae live in carcasses.

Even in this short work he managed to communicate his enthusiasm for the subject. Can anyone not be intrigued by the information that blowflies of the genus *Chrysomya* in South Africa had been shown to fly distances of at least 63.5 kilometres? Or by learning that flies often land near a carcass before laying their eggs on or in it, perhaps as a means of avoiding predation?

I have had only two important experiences with blowflies in my life. Some blowflies – though none, fortunately, in Britain – are obligate parasites of living flesh, and in Africa I was once the victim of *Cordylobia anthropophaga*, the Tumbu fly. It was with horror but also fascination that I treated myself. The fly's larva, that does not need a pre-existing wound to burrow into human flesh, causes a swelling, but the larva can be forced to emerge from its burrow if its spiracle is covered by petroleum jelly so that it can no longer breathe, and this I did. From this I learned that a commitment to to observation, even of oneself, can

reduce, if not revulsion itself, at least the psychological consequences of revulsion.

Quite a lot earlier in my life, when I was still a child, I had found a toad, alive though clearly very debilitated, whose head was being eaten by maggots. Again I was repelled, and when later I told the adults what I had seen they refused to believe me. Such a thing could not be, they said. This taught me the necessity to hold fast to one's own direct experience and not accept that authority, *qua* authority, was always in the right. In Dr Erzinçlioğlu's book on blowflies, I discovered that I had been right all along and this is what I read therein:

*Lucilia bufonivora* is an obligate parasite of toads (*Bufo vulgaris*) in Britain... The eggs are usually laid on the back or shoulders of the toad, and hatching is timed to coincide with the moulting of the toad, when there is a liquid exudate on the toad. The larvae invade the eyes and nostrils, killing the host and completing their development on the remains.

I was early cured of any tendency to nature mysticism by this toad and its parasites, or any illusion that nature was always kindly or beautiful. By contrast, it was always interesting, perhaps a more important quality.

As I have mentioned, I think of Dr Erzinçlioğlu surprisingly often, considering that I met him but once. But again as I have half-intimated, I have never met a man with whom I desired so quickly to become friends. And I must admit that I sometimes have unworthy and even dangerous thoughts about his death.

Why should so worthy a man, one who had so much to give the world, have died at so early an age when many lesser human beings, who consumed but did not contribute, survived for decades longer? It seemed unfair, even unjust. The universe should be better arranged.

I have to suppress these thoughts because, as the history of the Twentieth Century showed, that way madness lies. There is an existential equality to or inherent in Man – between men – that transcends their individual characteristics. This is recognised in medical ethics, according to which a doctor makes no enquiry into the moral worth of his patient, but treats him as best he can whatever he is like. When people discovered that I worked as a doctor in a prison, they asked me whether I did not find it difficult sometimes to treat people who had done the most terrible things. Oddly enough, I did not find it at all difficult; a doctor is like a lawyer at a trial who presents the best case he can on behalf of his client, even if he knows him to be a perfect swine. He puts such considerations out of his mind: it is not his place to decide whether a man merits his suffering, as in many cases he does; and what at

first is a conscious decision soon becomes second nature. I once had a patient who, acting as a baby-sitter for a neighbour, impaled three children on railings, and who now had a cough. I treated the cough as I would have treated anyone else's cough. We are lucky to live in a society in which we do not treat people after their desert, for huge numbers of us are treated much better than we deserve.

By strange coincidence, Dr Erzinçlioğlu's little book quotes a definition of equality that brings to mind Hamlet's riposte to Claudius about how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. According to the man who wrote this definition, the great self-taught French entomologist, Henri Fabre, the only meaning of equality is contained in the following:

At the surface of the soil, exposed to the air, the hideous invasion [of maggots] is possible; ay, it is the invariable rule. For the melting down and remoulding of matter, man is no better, corpse for corpse, than the lowest of the brutes. Then the Fly exercises her rights and deals with us as she does with any ordinary animal refuse. Nature treats us with magnificent indifference in her great regenerating-factory: placed in her crucibles, animals and men, beggars and kings are one and all alike. There you have true equality, the only equality in this world of ours: equality in the presence of the maggot.

Hamlet, you may remember, tells Claudius that:

A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

When Claudius asks him what he means by this, Hamlet replies:

*Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.*

The worm of this passage, however, is a maggot; for while people may fish with an earthworm, earthworms do not eat of human bodies, but maggots, known also at the time as worms, do. And although it was proved only in 1668 (by a Florentine physician, Francesco Redi) that maggots were not spontaneously generated in rotting flesh, as many at the time supposed, but were the product of eggs laid by flies, Shakespeare knew perfectly well that flies generated maggots. So Shakespeare agreed with Fabre, that maggots and flies taught Man a lesson in existential or transcendental equality.

So I try to put thoughts of the unfairness, the injustice, of Dr Erzinçlioğlu's early death out of my mind. A life is not well-lived, in any case, according to its length. We are not far

off the time when almost everyone will live three times as long as Schubert, but no one will conclude that each life will then be three times as well-lived as was his. Still, I should not be telling the truth if I did not admit that thoughts, which are both dangerous and absurd, recur to me, and which I have to struggle to dismiss from my mind, that it would have been better if someone could have died in Dr Erzinçlio?lu's place.

It is strange, though, how such absurd and dangerous thoughts return to torment us (or at least me). When my much-beloved little dog was still alive, I used to wonder whether, if it were a choice between his life and that of a human being, which I would choose to save. Guiltily I had to acknowledge that I would prefer to save the life of my dog, though in practice I might act otherwise. And then there is the stupid but recurring question, if you could have only the work of one artist, one writer, one composer, which would it be? Fortunately, we are never called upon to answer these question, so why do we ask them?

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**Theodore Dalrymple's** latest book is