

Writing About Small Things



by Theodore Dalrymple

Chekhov says somewhere that a writer—a *real* writer, that is—ought to be able to write a story about anything, an ashtray for example.

Actually, I don't think that that would be so difficult a task: Ashtrays in the old days would have witnessed quite a lot, if they had been sentient and observant. And then, of course, cigarette ends might have quite a lot to say before their demise. The only problem is that readers these days might not know what an ashtray is, for they are seldom put out anywhere for fear of encouraging people to smoke. Gone are the days when every gentleman, whether he smoked or not (though mostly he did), carried an elegant cigarette lighter that he

whisked out of his pocket assiduously to light the cigarette of his female interlocutor. Almost certainly, many affairs began this way. Of course, the world must have smelled dreadfully of cigarette smoke, stale and throat-catching—except that, used to it as we were, our throats did not catch. But now I find even a single cigarette smoked on an outdoor terrace intolerable.

To return, however, to the possibility of writing about small things: I am very fond of idly observing the wildlife on the terrace of my tiny additional house in France that I use as my library. There is, for example, a large green lizard (large, that is, by European standards, not by those of the Komodo dragon) that seems to live in the pile of kindling by the disused bread oven of ancient stone. During the season—I am not sure *what* season, but I suppose it must have something to do with sex—he has a sky-blue head. He is very shy, however, at least with humans, and the slightest movement on my part sends him scuttling back into the sticks.

Then there is a sweet little vole that sticks his head out of a hole in the wall. He, too, is very shy, and he sniffs the air as if the world were full of enemies that he can smell. Of course, there are weasels, badgers, foxes, kites, and owls about, not to mention the one-eyed ginger-and-white moth-eaten feral cat that always slinks away guiltily like a politician being asked a difficult question, so I suppose the vole is only being reasonable. Health and safety come first.

But it is the insects that I enjoy watching most. Today, for example, there was a black, flying-antlike creature, only longer and more nervous in its movements than an ant. I am, alas, not entomologist enough to get much further than that it was clearly a hymenopteran of some description, rather an aggressive one in fact, and a carnivore, for it was dragging a dark creature about half its size along the stone wall of the house, looking for a hole or crevice in which to deposit its prey. It ran up and down the wall searching for such a hole or

crevice, dragging the prey with it. As with a wheelbarrow, it could go both forwards and backwards, and was very energetic in its search. The legs of its prey flickered slightly, probably in its death throes.

After a time, the insect deposited its prey on a thin ledge. It was then that I saw, to my surprise, that the prey was a spider, by now dead, for its legs no longer moved, even when I touched it lightly with the bristle of a brush. Normally, one expects spiders to catch insects and not insects to catch spiders, so this seemed a mild reversal of the order of things.

Having temporarily deposited its prey, the insect went off to look for its permanent depository. It, the insect, must have realized that it was easier to search without a burden. What an intelligent creature, I thought, and certainly it was very industrious and purposeful.

But then I began to have doubts about its intelligence. It had no system in its running, jumping, and flying back and forth; as it half-jumped or half-flew from stone to stone, it covered the same ground several times; and if only it had been less busy and slowed down to take a calmer, more measured look, it could have seen that the wall was full of potentially useful holes and crevices. It took him far longer, and much more energy, to find one than it need have done.

I felt an inclination almost to help my fellow creature. I could have taken a piece of paper and edged it into one of the many holes that would have been suitable to its purpose. If it had been prepared to learn, I would have saved it much trouble. I did not help it, though, because I thought it wouldn't understand my efforts or be grateful, any more than a student understands and is grateful to ChatGPT when he uses it to write an essay. The insect would probably have been frightened away. I might even have damaged it.

If it had been prepared to learn: words pregnant with meaning. Is there any of us who could not utter those words about ourselves? A superior intelligence looking down on us might easily feel about us as I felt about the hymenopteran.

I went away for my lunch, had a siesta, and returned to my little house. There, to my surprise, I saw the creature once more behaving in exactly the same way, only with a different prey this time, a little brown spider. (I assume the insect was the same; certainly, it was of the same species.) Was it building up a store for the winter?

The cicadas were kicking up their usual racket, and I thought of La Fontaine's fable. In it, the cicada has spent the whole summer singing, but when the north wind begins to bite has nothing left to eat. She asks her neighbor, the ant, for food, which she, the ant, has spent the summer accumulating for wintertime. "You sang all the summer, though," replies the ant. "Very well, now you can dance."

I can think of more than one country that resembles the cicada more closely than the ant.

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