

## **Fruit flies over Baghdad**

My office has fruit flies. Oh, they're clearing up. They're not nearly as bad as before Christmas. Or last week even. Last week they hovered in clouds. They were like gnats over a gnu. Nasty, I believe, in the hip vernacular.

Really, it's a bit embarrassing. We're an environmental organization, after all. We promote waste reduction through composting, through recycling, through alternative methods such as vermicomposting. The soft sell to the community is that these waste reduction practices are easy, efficient, mess free. Bugs? Not if you take proper care and precaution.

I guess we didn't.

So now I'm praying that the fruit flies aren't that noticeable, that obvious. I'm praying that they don't carry off any small children. Mostly, I'm praying that they'll just leave me alone.

A week ago, I inhaled one.

A few days before that, I drank down three in a single serving of apple juice.

My tea has become a watery grave. Corpses float on the milky sea. I imagine their trip to the afterlife being most energetic. And jittery.

The other day I surprised myself while swatting a fruit fly from the air. The fact that I was killing one was hardly surprising – I've done that by simply breathing. No, what surprised me was the vehemence, the violence, of the act. A sharp breath escaped me as I slapped my palms together: "Ha!" I actually laughed as I squashed him flat. To emphasize the kill, I pointed my two index fingers towards the fallen insect, pistol-style. "Fruit fly!" I exclaimed, looking around. For a brief moment I felt proud.

And then embarrassed.

Frustration is a funny thing. You lash out in frustration, and for a moment, all feels right. For a moment, the squashing of that fruit fly was the rightest thing I could have possibly done. For a moment, it made sense. That there were several hundred to replace that one fallen fly was forgotten. That the fruit fly was incapable of doing me harm – that it was incapable of even thinking of doing me harm – was inconceivable. I don't believe that I even thought before I acted. I just lashed out.

And afterwards, I felt, well, wrong. "Bad karma," I muttered to a colleague. "I probably shouldn't have laughed."

Now, I'm not much of a Hindu. I'm not much of an anything, really, if I am to be classified by religious belief. Mostly, I'm a shop around kind of spiritual sort. I'll take

my dogma wherever it seems most wise – or inexpensive. But I do respect the notion of Karma. Enough bad deeds and my next life, my afterlife, my whatever, is going to suffer. I have this notion that killing for spite is wrong. That careless slaughter will permanently mark a soul.

Reflecting on the death of the fruit fly, I began to visualize the effect that killing made on the killer. In a vaguely philosophical vein, I began to imagine each soul as starting fresh, clean, pure. With each needless death it becomes stained. Blackened. Darken an entire soul and terrible things happen.

I imagined that the weighting of the sin was linked to the species terminated. A fly-sized kill left a fly-sized mark. A human-sized kill left a human-sized mark. For a brief moment, I considered elephants. Then the theory fell apart.

But while my weighting system was flawed, the notion of Karma was not. To kill carelessly is to kill wrongly. There can be no mistake in that. And thinking of careless killing, I began to think, as I often do, about the state of global politics.

Right now the United States is gearing up for a war. Rightly or wrongly, they have decided that the people of Iraq are to suffer for the misdeeds of their leader. Never mind that there are places in the world where terror is more prevalent. Never mind that, after having their weapons inspectors find nothing, the U.S. excuses for war are drawing ludicrously thin. Never mind that most of the people who will die will be as innocent – and as powerless – as fruit flies to a hand. The war will happen nonetheless.

That the U.S. is heading to war is not, in itself, the most appalling part. Sometimes war is inevitable. That they do so with swagger, with boastfulness, with both fingers cocked in a pistol style salute, is unforgivable. In reflecting, I think that maybe an elephant-sized mark on the soul is not so impossible.

I thought long and hard on the killing of a fruit fly the other day. I can only wonder if as much thought is going into a war with Iraq.