THE ILLUSTRATED LIFE OF ANIMALS BY KAT MENSCHIK AND BIOLOGIST DOCTOR RERUM MEDICINALIUM MARK BENECKE

by Kat Menschik & Mark Benecke

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch

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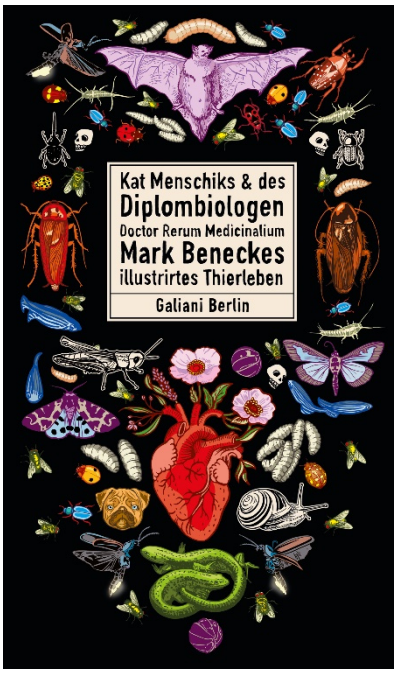

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POODLES

[pp. 28–34]

Nowadays, we think of poodles as pets or companion dogs. This is also how they are described by the Federation Cynologique Internationale (FCI). The older generation in Germany sometimes refer to someone who is moping around looking miserable as looking like a ‘drowned poodle’. This expression comes from the fact that originally poodles were not kept as lap or family dogs but used for hunting. The intelligent animals jumped into the water to retrieve the ducks that their owners had shot. The dripping wet poodle’s coat then looked as if the dog had been ‘drowned’, especially as a poodle’s fur is frizzy and therefore absorbs a lot of water.

The peculiar ‘poodle clip’ style came about as a way of ensuring that the poodle’s fur did not hang down, heavy with water, but continued to serve as a heat buffer for the dogs’ heart and lungs. The front and hind legs were shaved, for example, while the loins, knees and ankles remained furry in order to protect these body parts from the cold. The now redundant tassel on the tail served as a rudder for steerage. The ‘poodle clip’ allowed the animals to swim

more easily, but also partly protected them from losing too much body heat and from sharp objects.

The ‘palm tree’ hair style often seen on Shih Tzus – those cheerful lapdogs who provide company for the lonely hearts, also known as a ‘top knot’ in canine English, was also used on poodles in the olden days to prevent the fur on their unshorn heads from falling over their eyes and face. In addition, owners could identify their poodle more easily in the hunting-throng by means of their different coloured hairbands. The subsequent development was the ‘English saddle’ or ‘lion’ clip, which all dog grooming salons use to this day. As poodles do not moult, their woolly, thick, frizzy fur grows long and dense. This means that poodles, even without a specific clip, need to be shorn so that their entire bodies don’t become covered in an increasingly thick mop of hair.

The discussion about the correct poodle clip – including the hideous continental clip, as well as the puppy-, jacket and pants-, or even teddy bear clip – continues to this day. The official association and competition requirements at poodle shows are strict.

The rules state: ‘The coat on the hind and front limbs may be left in place if the following preconditions are met unreservedly: only the lower part of the forelimbs, from the claws to the claw on the carpal bone may be shorn; also the lower part of the hind limbs up to a height that corresponds to the forelimbs. The clippers may only be used on the toes, head and tail according to the aforementioned regulations. The following may be permitted as an exception: a short beard on the lower jaw, no longer than 1 cm; its lower line is shorn parallel to the jaw. The beard form, known as ‘*de bouc*’ (goat’s beard) is not permitted. The pompom on the tail may be omitted (however, this slightly lowers the score given for ‘coat structure’).’

The regulations cover pages and pages. Non-observance carries penalties: ‘Any other clip that does not correspond to the specifications will result in disqualification.’ And that’s that.

We could chuckle about such petty rules if it were only a matter of getting thrown out of a beauty pageant for dogs. But unfortunately, the discussion about the right sort of poodle fur leads us to areas we find uncomfortable today. In a moment you’ll see that hate speech, mobbing, abuse and worse have always been around.

‘My poodle and I experienced a lot of things together, but we also suffered a great deal,’ reported Hans Thum in his memoirs in 1957 writing about the

‘Karakul Cut’, the new poodle cut he conceived in the 1930s. ‘Twenty-five years ago an article appeared in a dog magazine with the headline: ‘The Thumish Abomination’. It described the ‘despicable act’ of designing, introducing and propagating the ‘Karakul Cut’. This was followed by a breeding ban on all poodles sporting my cut. The head of the Berlin Poodle Association at the time advised me during a public meeting to become a dustbin man, and the first chairman of the main association even applied for me to be put into a concentration camp.

The (National Socialist, M.B.) Council for Poodles banned the Karakul cut and called it ‘un-German’. All poodles not aligned to party principles with little rolls and jackets were considered bastards, were banned from breeding and were not given food ration cards during the final stages of the war.

So we had both been spat on - not just me, but also my poodle - and I took offence at the latter. But I didn’t react in the way they expected me to, and from then on, I propagated all the prohibitions, persecutions and harm which followed. Soon it wasn’t just poodle friends who took an interest, but also the owners of other breeds, even the general public. As the years passed, poodle friends from other countries even started contacting me, and I sent them pictures and clipping descriptions.

In 1945 we were freed - at least the poodle was, because the new poodle club that I founded prioritised the poodle for its own sake and not for its fur style.

As early as 1949, the first special poodle exhibition was held in Berlin in the Zoological Garden where poodles sporting the modern Karakul cut were shown and judged for the first time on an equal footing with those sporting the old standard cut. On this memorable day, 25th September 1949, 148 poodles in both shearing types appeared in Berlin, more participants than had ever been achieved before at a German poodle show.

We had both held out, the poodle and me, and so together we experienced the great successes of the exhibitions in Hamburg, Berlin, Dusseldorf and Frankfurt that followed, which put in the shade everything that had gone before. On the 2nd June 1951, thousands of people made a pilgrimage to the ‘Wilhelma’, Stuttgart’s zoological garden - poodle lovers, lovers of all dog breeds and animal lovers in general - just to watch me styling a poodle with the Karakul cut.

The event was opened by thirty-six flower-decorated floats, each with a poodle, which drove through the main streets to the venue. Reporters from radio and television stations also attended. The poodle exhibition the next day drew eighteen thousand people, some from the most remote parts of

Germany, often at great personal sacrifice and effort just to celebrate this special day with their precious dogs.’

Thum became the president of the International Poodle Breeding Federation. He was delighted not only by the fact that Winston Churchill and Thomas Mann were poodle-lovers, but also that in 1787, the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, still a child at the time, on the death of his poodle had composed a requiem ‘Elegy on the death of a poodle’ in *mesto* (sad, sorrowful) with vocals:

‘Die, though so many joys wither away on the
trajectory of life!
You were so pure and free of all wickedness,
and black your frizzy silk hair.
I have known some people
whose soul was as black as your coat.’

Thum printed the complete text of the requiem to Beethoven’s dog together with the score in his poodle book, which was published in several editions following the restoration of the author’s honour in the 1960s.

As previously mentioned, Churchill also owned a poodle. To the British statesman, this dog ‘was the only living thing that does not ask annoying questions and does not pass on what it has heard.’

Hans Thum even regarded life with his poodle as a ‘fateful path with a kind, wise and good-natured being’. This was appropriate, as the poodle had twice saved his life during the war. Twice Thum had only made it into the air-raid shelter because of his dog, without which there would be no Karakul poodle haircut. During one air strike, the first shelter rejected Thum because of his dog and sent him to another shelter. That first shelter took a direct hit shortly afterwards and was completely destroyed. During another air strike, Thum had wrapped his poodle in a blanket and carried him in his arms. The warden only allowed him into the shelter because she believed him to be carrying a small child. ‘They agreed willingly and allowed me to pass with my sick ‘poodle’ child,’ Thum later said. ‘Sitting on the bench in the basement shelter, I imagined the warden’s face were she to come over to my swaddled bundle to stroke its cheek.’

From these surreal events, the horror of which we can barely imagine today, we now move on to another kind of poodle, namely those that have been crossed with wolves.

MERMAIDS

[pp. 58–64]

People in past times knew nothing, we are told. They were superstitious, the Middle Ages were dark, the world unenlightened and cold.

Or so we are led to believe. But when we look at the descriptions of nature from that era customarily categorised under animals, plants and minerals, then I for one am amazed at the accuracy of the information. For example, in the famous description of the man of the day (*Homo diurnus*) in contrast to man of the night (*Homo nocturnus*) and man of the forest (*Homo sylvestris*) by Carl von Linné in an eighteenth-century edition of his *Systema Naturae*, he lists the following observations about notable specimens:

‘In the summer of 1775, Sir Sprones died in England in his 57th year. He weighed 569 pounds and was four feet three inches wide across his shoulders. Eighteen bearers struggled to winch him onto the stretcher. Once he had been stabbed with a long penknife, but because of the thick layer of fat, it didn’t penetrate his inner organs.

We also recall seeing an almost four-foot wide Englishman in Petersburg, who filled the entire width of a wagon.

In October 1775, we saw a four-year old girl at the boat market in Amsterdam who was covered in hair, who had as much hair on her body as a deer and tiger hair with tiger markings. Apart from this the child was beautiful, delicate and well formed, but otherwise an object of curiosity for the doctors.’

Finding such reports about ‘day and night people’ in a book about shells, worms, birds, cats, insects and pangolins might seem strange today. But at the time these aberrations were seen as fascinating – just as they would be today in medical publications or the tabloid press. So it is no wonder that Linné wrote about them.

The biologist was describing what he himself had seen or heard about in letters from his prolific, worldwide network of sources. Linné’s two-part naming of animals and plants (according to their genus and species, i.e. ‘first’ and ‘last’ name) is used to this day. On occasion I have been allowed to take a look at his collection, some of which is kept in the London Linnean Society, of which I’ve been a member for decades. So nothing in the old reports is really false.

More surprising is that one of the most famous naturalists, Konrad Gesner, spoke of horned hares, forest devils, mermaids and unicorns in his animal books two hundred years before Linné. Unlike morbidly obese people, girls with conspicuous hair growth and people with strange sleeping and waking habits, the Wolpertinger, a fabled German creature, and others like it, don’t really exist.

In Gesner’s book, which first appeared in Latin in four parts between 1551 and 1558, he initially only lists mermaids in volume 3 from 1556 in the chapter ‘Fish and other things from the sea’ without any further comment: ‘Nereis, a mermaid’ – the end. The mermaids are categorised among the group of viviparous and lung-breathing water creatures.

In the following decades, Gesner’s animal book appeared in revised and illustrated new editions. The revisers were not quite sure how to deal with his peculiar animals. For example, fifty years later a new edition of Gesner’s work says this about unicorns:

‘Because many different kinds of unicorns are described, but none of the describers have seen them for themselves, I present the reports one after the other, so that the reader can pay better attention. You must remember that

horns can also grow on people due to diseases they have suffered from. There are also horned animals among birds and insects.’

The logic is faulty – just because horns exist somewhere, this doesn’t mean unicorns have to exist – but the basic facts in the text of the new edition are correct. As evidence of peculiarly horned animals, Gesner added to his text a picture of the skull of what is now called a hornbill, a feathered marshland dweller. This bird really does have a form of horn on its beak. Rhinoceros beetles, which come from a completely different group of animals, also have a horn.[1]

So horned animals do exist, so far, so good. In contrast to Carl von Linné, Gesner didn’t have a worldwide network of correspondents. His sources had reported inaccurately or, most likely mistaken narwhal teeth for unicorn horns. I managed to get a look at one of these beautiful teeth in 2019 in the archive of the Museum for Natural History in Berlin, which explicitly referenced the fact that it had often been taken for a unicorn horn. In any case, the size and shape of narwhal teeth match the modern-day concepts of a unicorn horn.

But back to the mermaids, which Gesner called ‘*Meerfräulein*’. In his new woodblock print edition, the mermaid has a kind of cat’s head, strikingly muscular arms and finned legs. On the shore, it or rather ‘she’ is able to sit up and show her fish, crab or whale-like body. Nobody doubted the existence of mermaids back then, ‘because everyday experience showed that wonderful creatures were seen in the depths of the great ocean. Their upper body resembled that of a woman, the lower body a fish, but they are rough and hairy and scaly.’ It’s true that there are creatures in the depth of the ocean that take our breath away. But the rest of it is not quite accurate.

Gesner claimed that the Roman Emperor Tiberius saw a mermaid some two thousand years ago (counting from today). Gesner goes on to say: ‘When they die, then they weep and sigh.’ When a mermaid was washed up on the beach of the Greek peninsula Peloponnese, she wept and sighed so bitterly that the people made space and allowed her to move off towards the sea. With the help of her tail, the stranded mermaid crawled back to the water and swam ‘with great haste into the wide and deep sea and was never seen again.’ As this testimony was met with decisive disbelief, Gesner adds that ‘such mermaids have been described by many others too.’

[1] As colleagues Hu, Linz and Moczek discovered in 2019, the prothoracic horns of scarab beetles are actually generated from wing serial homologs.

This all seemed very strange to me. Since the ‘*Fräulein’* part of Gesner’s ‘*Meerfräulein’* was something that elderly ladies demanded to be called back in the day when I was a student, at least as long as they had never married, the *Meerfräulein’* – mermaids – were probably also considered to be unmarried too. But why mention this in the case of sea creatures? This could be something to do with the sailors’ longing for female and at least half-human companionship. Back then, an unmarried woman was assumed to be a virgin. Perhaps the sailor could even father a hybrid creature?

Gesner actually always did his research properly and was not given to dodgy reports. He was a scholar through and through, spoke and read Hebrew and Ancient Greek, lived in Augsburg, Paris, Zurich, Montpellier, Lausanne and Basel, studied medicine and worked as a university professor for natural sciences. He was also a doctor; from 1554 onwards Doctor for the city of Zurich. Now even the most rigorous researchers are interested in oddities – this is not something I know only from my personal experience, but also from some of my colleagues. But I just couldn’t understand why an author of an encyclopaedia, published in 1541, as well as of the extensive animal book that appeared ten years later, would continue to describe mythical creatures so carelessly up until his death in 1565 – Gesner died of the plague before he reached fifty. So I went through his books again and was amazed.

Even in his original animal books there were mythical creatures, including mermaid nereids, unicorns and half-human sea devils, known at the time as *Daemon, Satyrus* or *Pan martinus* with horns on their heads and lovely upper arm fins. ‘Nereis, a sea nymph’ is categorised between sea butts (plaice), sea pikes, sea dogs (seals) and sea spiders, all of which actually exist. All sorts of what we consider to be magical creatures were included in his book, right up to the final edition in 1670. Although by then the animal book had been ‘corrected and added to’ by Georg Horst ‘with imperial majestic Roman freedom’, as was stated on the front page. I suspected Doctor Horst of having also taken the liberty of fantasizing, but Horst had really only expanded on the seeds sown by Gesner. However, Horst’s new version also included ‘sea bishops’. These are clearly recognisable forgeries – actually just rays sliced and dried as souvenirs for tourists and miracle-seekers by way of a process that makes them appear to be wearing the Catholic headgear, the mitre, hence ‘sea bishops’. Today they would be called mermen.

These sea bishops and mermen, still known today as ‘Jenny Hanivers’, are cleverly arranged guitar-fish. Their belly faces upwards while they are carved, it is cut lengthwise, opened up and then transformed into what looks like the Christian church vestment. The nostrils on the underside of the fish become visible when the abdomen is opened up and now appear like eyes. The fish mouth stays in place and the two-part, elongated mating organs,

which are actually hardened fins, become legs. This not only looks gruesome in the animal book, but also looks scary in real life. To the left and right of our mermaid on page 61 [German edition] you can see such a fake sea bishop, drawn by Kat Menschik, based on the original wood prints.

But we let ourselves off too lightly when we laugh at those who believed in strange creatures. The alleged mermaids may have been seals, and the sea bishops are still being put together to this day and are entirely convincing to people who know little about animals.

Besides, a good story always travels. With the advent of letterpress printing, gossip, sensations and curiosities travelled the most – just like today. We will never know whether Gesner succumbed to the charm of the notion that mermaids enrich our world, or whether he initially dutifully listed them, not suspecting how odd his entry would seem in the future. I bow to the great scientist, to his love of order and nothing more.

RED-LEGGED HAM BEETLE

[pp. 72–78]

At the beginning of my doctorate, I was still wet behind the ears. My student digs in Cologne didn’t have any central heating. I had lengthened my lab coat by sewing it together with a second old one, so that my ankles were covered in case something dripped down: I didn’t want anything to seep into my sandals. And so, like Forrest Gump, I traipsed through the world, or rather the laboratory, and delighted in everything I discovered.

From the genetics lab, a former monkey house, it was just a few steps to the milk glass panes in the basement of Cologne’s Institute for Forensic Medicine. This is where the bodies were kept and so, in November 1995, I took a look at the insects that lived on them. No-one else was interested in them and nobody wanted to watch. Often, I’d be there alone late at night or at the weekend, and if I wasn’t alone, then the medical examiners Manfred and Manfred – yes, these were their real names – kept their distance from all the creepy-crawly stuff. Golden times for me, because nowadays the corpses

and their maggots, beetles and adhesions ‘belong’ to the prosecution. At the time, I could examine whatever I wanted.

Since I was more familiar with squid and leeches, I collected all things living on the body with childish abandon. I had previously collected butterfly pupae in France, but only finished growing them in Germany. I gave one of them to my girlfriend Sylvie. My gift to her really did emerge from the puparium. As soon as the wings had hardened, we set the newly formed butterfly free. It was wonderfully romantic.

So I thought I would see what becomes of the larvae taken from dead bodies. Many of the insects disappeared from my desk drawer during these breeding experiments, as I still had to learn how thin the maggots, the youthful stages of flies, could make themselves when they wanted to escape. And they always wanted to and almost always did escape from an old jam jar with a cotton wool seal.

My boss warned me gently, but firmly: firstly, I should not tell anyone that my cadaver maggots had escaped, and secondly, that it had happened in the office. So in the future, I did a better job of sealing my jars, but still allowed some air to get in. Insects like to breathe fresh air too. I must point out, though, that our biologists’ office only consisted of bulky unwanted furniture from the university in any case – no joke.

Anyway, one day I discovered two larvae on the edge of the cotton wool seal of a breeding jar that I had additionally secured with a piece of cloth and a rubber ring. Firstly, they looked very different from blowfly larvae because they had little legs. Secondly, they were thinner, slimmer so to speak, and thirdly, they felt so at home that they didn’t try to escape but pupated and began their transformation into adulthood. How exciting! I couldn’t be quite sure because the insects might also have been slowly dying: the pupae stage, which most people know as the ‘cocoon’ stage in butterflies, is a leg- and motionless intermediate phase. Death and tissue transformation are so similar that you can’t tell from the outside. But I was convinced that the two creatures had deliberately positioned themselves in the narrow gap between the fabric seal and the jar in order to transform. Now it was a waiting game.

Fifty-four days later I was amazed. Previously green shimmering, blue metallic, shining chequered flesh flies or simple black to deep black flies had emerged in the glass and buzzed around – but this time two outstandingly different insects were sitting in the jar. They had deep red - tending towards brownish - legs that contrasted with their body armour, which was glittery blue with a delicate green hue. Their feelers were longer than those of flies and thickened to small pistons, with small buttons on the end. They were two

red-legged ham beetles! I had collected them from a decomposed corpse that had been lying by a railway embankment. The corpse's soft tissue also contained the larvae of cheese flies, known as cheese skippers because of their jerky jumping. In parts of southern Europe, jumping cheese fly larvae are considered a sign of cheese ripeness and are – contravening European law – crushed together with the cheese and eaten. The cheese is called Casu Marzu (Sardinian for 'spoiled cheese') and smells too strong even for my nose and is really only something for gourmets. I know one cheese dealer in Germany who has it in his cellar and the whole area around his shop smells of Casu Marzu even when the doors and windows are closed.

The head of the decomposed corpse had been severed on the train tracks and the hair had been scalped and had dried up. The larvae of the newly-hatched ham beetles came from this hair. How beautiful the mature adults looked! Their Spanish name sounds even more fancy than 'Red-legged ham beetle': *Escarabajo del tocino.* Translated, this simply means 'ham beetle', but still.

My medical colleagues at the time did not share my enthusiasm for the blue and red shimmering insects. Biologists are also reserved when it comes to this magnificent creature. 'Often found near ports, brought in by ships that deliver copra (dried coconut), hams, furs, skins, dried fruits, cheese, sausage and flour,' is the matter-of-fact phrasing in books about storage pests. 'The pupation either takes place inside the foodstuff in a delicate hollow or on dry sections of soft material.' A hollow! So I had been lucky that my larvae had been situated under the hair of the dead body's skull, so that I could discover and breed them. I would never have sought or found the animals inside the actual corpse. I didn't even know they existed.

'Cannibalism can also occur alongside robbery,' says one of my favourite books on so-called 'vermin' (the word is actually printed on the book's cover), 'and the larvae and adult ham beetles can go without food for several weeks.' Admirable creatures then, who fly under the radar of classic animal books: it's only when they eat food supplies that they get a mention.

Today, we sometimes find two-legged ham beetles in animal food stores, and the beautiful creatures are currently spreading throughout Europe via euro pallets: it is getting warmer and warmer, and the larvae therefore now also survive in Central Europe. In the past, they were only seen in what we called the tropics or in freight from distant continents. 'Often found in large numbers on ships, especially those coming from East or South Asia,' one fifteen-year old book stated. 'In hides and skins where the beetle and its larvae mimic the larvae of the hide beetle,' my colleague Weidner says in his book, which also only recognises 'storage pests and domestic vermin' but no marvellous

creatures. But the truth shimmers through the sparse description: it is a web of life, in which one creature hunts another, the well-known cycle of ‘eat and be eaten’. In the cycle of life, the hide beetles eat animal hides, the ham beetle eats ham and coconut mats or, if they can, hide beetles or decomposed corpses. And so it goes on, in every which way, billions of times over.

Red-legged ham beetles have been found on Egyptian mummies, not as grain robbers who ate what was given to the dead as supplies for their journey to the afterlife, but at mummy unwrappings, which were considered chic social events in the 19th century. The insects found on the Egyptian mummies were quite literally ham beetles. That’s because ham is dried and therefore mummified corpse tissue is made up of what, in animal tissue, we call ‘ham’. In other words, if you eat ham, you’re eating slices of mummified tissue, usually made from dried animal leg muscle.

The insects that eat cadavers and food supplies teach us something. As soon as we humans stop creating the order that we would like to have – death is also just a state of disorder and dissolution – other types of animals utilise that which we consider immortal. Most of these animals came into being long before humans did. They are often far older than we are, often millions of years older. These animals will still be around when no-one remembers human beings any more. So corpse- and supply- eating insects allow us to gaze into a world that is older, bigger but also more enduring and better adapted to life than we are.

Another beetle, the so-called death watch beetle, matches this by showing us our expiring lifespan – or more precisely, it makes it audible. The many tiny holes that some people know from antique wooden (not faux wood) furniture are the gateways to their eating corridors. Scientifically the animals are named woodworm beetles. Tiny death watch beetles hatch as larvae from the eggs that adult death watch beetles lay in slightly cracked wooden furniture found in damp or unheated rooms. As the worm-shaped larvae dig their winding corridors just below the surface of the wood – otherwise they would not be able to get out in the end, because they can’t turn around in their narrow wooden corridors – you believe you can hear the death watchers gnawing, like a constant mechanical clock ticking away.

In fact, the adult male death watch beetles bang the hard armour on their heads against the wood in order to impress the females. To me, this knocking sounds less like ticking and more like a pretty broken clock because often two seconds tick away, one immediately after the other. What’s more, death watch beetles live in wood that has already been damaged by fungi. So

it’s more about the circle of life and nutrient exchange than the finiteness of being and the sounds of death.

The pulsing death watch beetle sound is not always considered a sign of approaching death. In the Inn Valley, the knocking signifies an approaching marriage, in Mecklenburg it is a sign of approaching rain. But these are friendly exceptions. The Swiss authors of the multi-volume *Dictionary of German Superstitions* reported that around a hundred years ago, people ‘everywhere’ believed in the dark warning of death watch beetles. The name of the creatures was different from place to place, but mostly related to death: death bell, death smith, death hammer or death sleeper. But in former times, butterflies, crickets chirping by the stove, ants, white spiders, fireflies, swarms of bees, toads, hares on a crossing, deer, chamois, howling dogs, black cats, moles underground beneath a sick room, restless horses, bats, pigeons, owls, ravens and swallows were all considered messengers of death and some still are, so perhaps it is no wonder that this was also true of the pulsating beetle.

[END OF SAMPLE]