

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

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See?

Tens of thousands of swarming Carneolian honeybees have collected on a shrub behind the garden in a seething football-sized cluster around the old queen. Smaller blobs of bees dangle from the bottom of the cluster: with every one in constant motion it's hard to tell whether they're climbing aboard or dropping off. From a whirl circling the swarm comes the pulsing roar of wings. I imagine the old queen's call: Arise, ye masses arise. We must flee, the usurpers are already within, gathering strength and grooming a newer, sleeker model. I go to seek a new home in exile. Arise, and come with me.

This is only Ellen's second year of beekeeping and we're not really ready for this. The first year had been inauspicious; when she'd taken off honey in June one of the hives, collectively enraged at the piracy of the stores they'd been laying in since April, lay siege to the house and garage, buzzing the car whenever we drove in and out. I swore I could see them hovering at the windows scouting our next move so they'd know where to head us off.

Next day they went sullenly back to business but they never really forgave us and carried on a brushfire insurgency for the rest of the summer. In August I made the mistake of walking barefoot into the backyard and one of them with a long memory for my pheromone thrust her venomous little lance into the tender sole of my right foot and dropped me howling to my knees. A week or two later, I came directly from work to meet her at a friend's dinner party. I saw her across the room and sat down beside her on the couch; she was pink-cheeked and seemed a little excited.

"What you been up to?" I said once I'd hit the hostess up for a glass of wine.

"Nothing much," she said. "Working the bees. Went to the emergency room. The usual stuff." She'd neglected to clamp the leg of her protective suit and taken the cover off the nasty hive, heedless of the cry of Arise ye Masses, Arise that had gone out from the sergeant of the watch. They boiled from the hive and enveloped her and she took fifty or so stings around her exposed ankle. She'd recognized the early symptoms of anaphylactic shock, and driven herself to the emergency room where they'd given her a shot of adrenaline and a prescription for an epinephrine pen in case it happened again. That was all. She was fine. But I was not, and though we lost that hive over the winter and it was replaced by a package of Carneolians that seemed a lot gentler, I'd been giving both hives a wide berth this summer, while still trying to stay within sight whenever she worked them.

Life seemed a risky enough business in the normal course of things without harboring creatures of uncertain temperament that had the capacity and occasionally the inclination to do serious harm. But she loved beekeeping and I liked her love for it, even if it made me nervous. I liked to watch her, from a safe distance, admittedly, once she'd completed her work on the hive, sitting close by on the old kitchen chair I'd put out for her, her long amber hair freed from helmet and veil, draped over the

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shoulders of her white bee suit, chin in hand just watching the bees coming and going at the entrance. I didn't know exactly what she was seeing or thinking that put both a slight frown and a slight half-smile on her face, but it seemed one of those mysteries you aren't in a hurry to solve.

So now I've been recruited to help her hive this swarm. Since we have just the single protective suit and she's the one with the allergy, I'm wearing only a t-shirt, Sox cap, jeans and sneakers: no socks, not even gloves. In for a dime, in for a dollar.

She's brought one of the instructional manuals from her library and we consult it at a safe distance from the swarm, trying to match our situation to the diagrams and text. According to the book, the procedure is simple. You cut the branch the swarm cluster has attached itself to, dropping it onto a sheet on the ground along with a super containing frames of brood. Responding to the smell of the brood, the swarm begins to move into the frames with a little help from the person on the ground; eventually, drawn in, the outliers begin to land and follow; when the queen goes in, they've accepted it as their new home. I could imagine another scenario: The call to arms, Arise ye masses, arise comes as the cluster-bomb hits the ground and unleashes ten thousand highly pissed-off and heavily armed bees on one convenient target.

"They don't sting when they're swarming," she says.

"Where does it say that?"

"Here." She puts her finger on the page. "It says they're full of honey and they have no home to defend yet so there's no reason to sting."

Sometimes it doesn't hurt to be an English teacher, especially when it comes to exact readings of texts. I move her finger. "It says they usually don't sting."

"So?" she says.

It isn't a big enough hole to wiggle through. I'm going to have to do it in a way that seems a far cry from the news clips on television where half a football stadium has been evacuated for a swarm and beekeepers dressed in protective gear resembling Hazmat suits.

But oddly, despite my experience of the past summer, I'm not really afraid. They seem preoccupied, some at the top of the cylinder, the scouts I think, zipping off in every direction, while others return and join the whirl. Everything is about their new home. There? No. Over this way? No. Where? Where?

Why would they even see or care about me. I'm in another dimension.

And then it occurs to me that I want to be in there with them, even if briefly, just to see what it's like and at that I walk forward and step inside the vortex, with only a hint of tension in the double bump from my sometimes erratic heart as I cross the line between inside and out. But there's no sign that they even know I'm there. Just another easily avoided obstacle like the branches hanging in close from the pines behind the garden. Only once am I touched with a small spat on the cheek, a brief collision, politely discounted as on a London sidewalk.

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Inside there is a dark smell of honey and a great collective roaring like the voice of a crowd. The skeins of their flight rise and fall, expand and contract, circle above and cross, altering the light with their dark little bodies in the shadow and the ping of refracted beams when they zip around into the yard from the trees. The forms are only glimpsed, as if with a little filament of quick strung out behind, the surround is an interrupted silken net perpetually rewoven in three dimensions while violently shaken to make the strands vibrate and whip. I feel more than understand the purpose behind, bees nothing if not purpose, the motion merely the incidental but stingingly resonant song to which we write words like exile and home and us, and all and soon.

After a while I turn to look through the spinning vortex; Ellen has moved closer, veil and closed book held to her chest and that half-smile frown on her face, her eyes glistening. I read the word she needs neither to speak nor let form on her lips.