

The Bees Are Disappearing



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Elizabeth Barsotti

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*didn't we plant the seeds,
weren't we necessary to the earth,

the vines, were they harvested?*

—Louise Glück, *October*

*the honey darkening in the bitter years,
the combs like funeral lace or wedding veils*

—Deborah Digges, *Telling the Bees*

The Farmhouse

stands on broomsticks, spoons
china plates & Ceylon tea
a river of dishwater & bed sheet sails,
rooster or hen, put the children to bed
in the garden weeds peek up again
bourbon tongue, clawfoot tub
stones in the fountain & coins in the sink
the wood grain dances
everything leaks.

My Utility, My Vanity

I have no use for angles.
I am six curves along a plane.

When I was three, I wanted
to be a taxi driver or a queen,
my crown topaz and silver—
my utility, my vanity—
my mother's body dipped in green.

My attic is full of prayer-beads.
I am meant for Halloween.
Speaking with ghosts
nightly, calves collapse
into maple leaves—
a golden throne, a yellow cab.

Four pebbles in my mouth—
speckled eggs in a nest of mint.
I am my father's garden—
a moon child, night owl. Born
a water sign, a dip into my mouth.

Letters to Imaginary Friends

Barney

Those days, it was easy to blame you
for all of my hardships. You were
the yang— tough like an orange peel
and just as acidic. Waking me too early
like the sun heating the outside of a tent
so that all of the campers rise sweaty
and abused. Maybe that's why fishermen
rise so early—to beat the preheating
of the oven. Rushing out to catch
something as cool and silver as an evening.
I think of you now when I smash my finger
in the bathroom door. You were a lonely
villain, and I'm sorry. I was too much
like the fish—flashing and diving.
You were far too bright.

Diggle

Late at night, we'd laugh for hours.
You pointed out constellations through
the window panes, and the year
of the meteor shower, we sat on the jetty
near the ocean and waited. You groomed
the sand with your long, thin fingers.
You traced my collar bone.
Your laugh was as hard and full
as an oyster shell, and I kept digging
for pearls. My mother told me *you can
tell a real pearl from a fake by rubbing it
against your teeth. If it's gritty, it's real.*
That night I left the beach grinding sand
between my teeth. Only now do I have strands
of pearls to wear to dinners at the shore.

Pomegranate

Do you remember when you and I ate a pomegranate together for the first time? Its small beads bursting in your mouth and mine. Our hands dripping crystal red juices into the porcelain bowl. Sitting around the oak table, we dissected pomegranate until it was nothing but the words leaking from our mouths like a large handful. You cracked the beehive shell. I spit each seed clean and white.

Oysters

The two of us eat oysters at the small restaurant on the shore, blue lanterns glowing against the darkness of the sea. The shore like the shell—black with night and white along the ridges. Dunes cropping up like barnacles. The two of us cling to each other. I wear your cotton sweater. The table is white, shines like the moon along the ocean. Square moon with so many shells of oysters. The quick swallow of night. Our mouths sucking. We will walk home along the water's edge, blue jeans rolled, hiding stones in the folds as we go, plucking the white ones from the black grains of sand. I will wear white to bed with you. I'll be the moon if you'll be the water, oysters in both of our bellies.

When I Marry Audrey

She will wear a gown of raw silk
with an empire waist. We will be wed
by the justice of the peace in a small
civil ceremony, and then we
will honeymoon on the French
Riviera. I will spend the first
few years of our marriage
serving her breakfast in bed—
eggs benedict and orange tea—
and begging her not to wear black
in May, but she will only laugh
and call me a fool as she tenderly
peels my socks from my feet
and rubs them at the end of a long
day. In the mornings, after
breakfast, she will stand in front
of the vanity mirror and fix the dark
bangs that fall across her forehead
like the heavy fringe on our Oriental
rug downstairs, which she tames
on Sundays with a wide toothed comb.
We will relish in spending quiet evenings
next to the fireplace. There, I will ask her
if she wants children, and she will come
home the next day with a kitten and a pup
named “Son” and “Daughter,”
and at Christmastime she will hang four
stockings and mistletoe, and I will kiss
her, and, like always, she will taste
like orange tea and toast
as she closes her chestnut eyes.

The Barsotti Buddha

Ladies clad in delicate brooches
with prayer beads in their purses
cross their legs on antique chairs.

The Barsotti Buddha
sits in lotus on a Tiffany Lamp
casting silver spoons onto tables
like blessings. The ladies stir

their coffee. Above them,
cathedral windows and ferns
rattle. The Buddha tips
his watering can. Spring greens
wilt under the weight of vinegar.

Kneeling, a woman picks up
her napkin and quietly says, *Amen*.

Talk

after Lucille Clifton

if the trees start to talk
in reedy whispers to each other
about the children in the tree house
and the small treasures
they tuck into each corner,
if the sticky-fingered maple
wants to steal every last buckeye
from mother's tattered basket—
if they want their stuff back,

then who will teach us quiet,
the forests louder than a rush-
hour street, loneliness as silent
as grass under feet?

Poem for the Unemployed Glassblowers
in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania

Where do you hide? In the winter? In the winter,
the furnaces shake. Christmas lights

hung as quiet altars. Nights—dreaming of vessels
and plates. It's the story of the underwater volcano—
pockets of hardening breath. So many days

spent twisting globes of light. Leading them down
from the peak of their glowing. Lost to night school
and learning to twist wires. Back early

from the family vacation. Back from digging
in the sand and wanting to melt it.

The trade was hard enough. Waking to a sun never
bright enough to see. Tinted lenses obscuring
sight, and molten bulbs beaming.

Still, in Bridgeport, a dwindling glass pile:
pillow lava, kids picking up treasures.

Devotion

I am obsessed with the idea of devotion.
I sent ninety love letters to Texas. One
every day for three months. I cook him
dinner every night. When I was young,
I wrote to God on small pieces of paper.
I kept them all in a carved wooden box.

Rest and Cleansing Moon

I want to lie down on a yellow bed
and watch night's creases open.
I've watched you for five years now.
I loved you in July under a moon
of claiming. I took you as if to make you.
I smothered night with a peeking
dawn and now I wait for sunset. Join
me under the cleansing moon. We've walked
far enough to rest. This journey can wait
till morning. For now, let's hide
from the constant expectation of the sun.

Gravity

A wished dandelion.
A seed sent to sow itself,

but now, it begs for tending.
The porches sag while my wife

shucks corn in the rocker—
silk sticks to her fingers as she rips

the husk from the cob. Autumn:
an earth-parade. Each evening

I rake the confetti. There is too much
to consider. The sun shortens its stay.

The leaves rot in the rafters, and I
cannot last the day. I walk to the barn.

There, the giant, sloping roof is also
caving. It all falls in around us.

Even clouds cling to the sky before
their wild and desperate collapse.

Libra

At the summit, the air is thin.
Days are measured with pebbles.

Mornings—light as water cupped
in palms—fade into indigo after

noon. The scale of an hour.
The height of the garden.

The shadows. The temple:
the precision of the lines

and the perfection of the circle.
The high point of the seasons.

Adam

Gatekeeper, shivering in the garden.
Daylight streams through tassel-flower—
devil's rattle. Night is brighter still.

Dreaming keeps a weary mind awake,
but sleep returns like rain, little
droplets of memory. A day's work—

a curse worth keeping. Fell hand timber
from the full to the change. Kill fat swine
for bacon, and shear sheep at the moon's increase.

Before the Fall

Before we wept, thirsty for the juice of paradise,
my bones were not my bones. They were his.

I dreamt of rocking cradles under
cover of night and naming our baby.

Naming all things as if they were my own.

Nursing Ezra
after Eleanor Stanford

We wake up at dawn, lie together
in his bed. The bare tops of trees
are visible through the windows.

Between my legs, I am bleeding.
He touches my breasts. We talk
about having a baby, naming him

Ezra. I want my breasts swollen
with milk. He falls asleep again,
but I cannot. I am thinking

about our baby. It is a blue
dawn. Branches like bars extend
past the window. I am bleeding

between my legs. I want to have
our baby. Bassinet in the corner,
white blankets. I wake up at dawn

to feed him. The rocking chair
creaks, the baby cries. My breasts
are heavy. I put them into his mouth.

To Our Daughter

Sometimes I think you've arrived,
thick-tongued under long eyelashes,

Abigail, from the grey-green lake at dawn
where you live—a mermaid

knocking against a coast of river-rocks,
waiting to be caught like a trout.

I hear you when my bath water splashes
or when February melts.

And your thin lips and wide eyes
open silently in the evening to folk music.

But the snow finds the gutters, and you
find your fins, and sink until another

cellist plucks and holds strings
like a banjo on a front porch swing.

Milk Moon

Night is the tugging
at my shirt and the blankets
in the cradle. No voice
yet calls out mother.

Cries demand me. Hours
dissolve, our soft world
attracting lint and morning
dew. The moon drifts in

and out like sleep while
the cuckoo plays another
waltz, while our sheep grow
restless with my counting.

Faustina's Recipe for Songbirds

Wait for the cat to deliver, then pluck
the tiny feathers. Line the sparrow bowl.

Cook the birds crisp enough to eat bones and all—

bones like lace, bones like straw,
bones that are not bones at all.

And pile the sparrows over polenta. Stretch
their thin spindles toward the middle.

Garnish with rosemary near the little feet.

Virgo

I till the fields, my arms laden with corn.
My back is bent. I am ripe and ready
for harvesting. September, the edges
of paper, curling. I brown butter in a cast
iron pan. The heat reaches. My body is sore,
but I am ready. I peel a pear. I swallow it.
The sky turns pewter. I hang shirts
on the line and it rains. They become
translucent. I reach for them, my fingers
long and quiet. I am swallowed by dampness.
In the kitchen, grits thicken on the stove. Clouds
move to fill the gutters, and I kneel to pray.

Royal Sable

The woman, she leads me towards the white.
I am thirsty. Thin.

I was dry hair; now I am lavender
darkened with blue,

dipped, dampened. I will tell them
of storm torn sky and barn door.

How the rain, the water

puddles on the paper. I drink

and keep the pigment hidden
in the middle. I create the wing
of the gypsy moth, the seagull

with a flick. She grips

my stem. Wrings me at the end
when the light fades. One summer and I am

frayed and tired. Stained as the cotton dress
with raspberry.

Winter Poem

I carved a polished bird
from a tangled nest.

The cotton or the corn—it doesn't matter.
Men grow both with thorny gloves, braced
against the weather, but winter's

getting thicker. The men in town turn themselves
to the glass or to the mine. Either way,
the heart sinks deeper in the chest.

There is a constant white of snow. The air
becomes a zipper pulled up hard.

Mad Moon

We argue, and
afterwards, he breaks
a glass against the wall.
He is proud of the torn
paper—the clipped blossoms
in a field of yellow, the delicate
stems, white as cotton
bleached in the sun.

Outside, sheets hang
in the moonlight—the night
so still it seems to beg for more
his clamoring, but I offer nothing.
My skirt billows in the wind.
Inside, I hear him—his noisy breath,
and I think of him as water
hitting the tin roof.

I am wet sheets, pulling
down the line.

On the Front Porch with My Father, Years Later

It is past midnight.

Streetlights glow, illuminate
nothing.

Across the street, the neighbor's fountain.
The two of us seated as we were then.

I remember: *We're married.*
Eloped at seventeen. My father's cigar
as it rolled across the table. He asks me
for a glass of water. The wicker creaks
as I rise.

The Asylum

We spend the afternoon
in the garden. Irises

catch light and push
toward evening.

She wears black to say,
I will act defeated.

The day sings its hours
with a voice like a gong.

I think of love in its least
perfect incarnations and think of hell.

There is heat and there is longing.
There are envelopes filed away.

Dust lingers like promise, vines
that we cut back still grow.

Octopus

Sometimes it is ugly
how things grow.

Love spins, becomes
almost unbearable.

It is hard to find
the cross among the thorns.

Show me a martyr and I will
show you an empty vessel.

Show me an empty vessel
and I will take you downstream

to the place where the cargo spilled.
There is a pile of broken glass

near Bridgeport dam. Maybe this
is how it started. The bottlenecks

glittered and I thought love.
There are plenty more words

where that came from. Offer:
Easy. Not: Water stopped.

Glass pile. A climb worth dying
for. A creek worth saving.

Erie or Ontario

Just before dusk, a pewter sky.

The edge of the lake—
a large and promising departure.

Flat stones and driftwood, tangles
of weed curled in the sand.

Evidence of people, caps
and cigarettes. Piles of flat

rock and bits of broken
plastic. The edge of the earth

as an escape from peopled beaches.
The lake, a tub of water.

A year since bushes burning in July heat.
Swarms of insects at the screen door.

The lake beyond, a flat, gray warning.
Something like a call to action.

Large lakes revealing themselves.
Long stretches of land, split by roads.

Driftwood piling up
like secrets, confessions

along the highway. A year since
her tangled mess of hair, and the way

the towels smelled rotten after
I bathed. Constant drives

to and from. The weight of tragedy
hanging. All the while I am missing

the mountains of southwestern Pennsylvania.
I am longing for a sign of something rising

in the distance.

Dream Poem

I dreamt of tuxedos on the beach, buttons gleaming,
a couple of strangers who I knew in high school
hidden from sight, speaking of a baby.

He said, *I will not take this tuxedo off
until the baby does.*

And I dreamt of totem poles in the front yard
of your parents' house. Inside, the woman I met
the day Katie broke her neck.

I dreamt of home and missing tables, everyone eating
on plastic chairs, Katie in her wheelchair, ramps
to nowhere, breaking.

Social Circle

When I was sixteen, the five of us
sat in Mike's lawn and drank beer
from a can. The boys smoked cigarettes,
and my girlfriends and I pulled up grass
until it stained our fingers green. Over

the summer, we paired and unpaired.
We took long rides in a minivan, seeking
out headlights—boys against
girls—taking our tops off. This odd

number: five of us, loving each
other. I was hungry for fullness—
evening. Daylight sinking
like the draining of a pool.

July's heat, keeping us planted
there— across from an old glass
factory, mortar crumbling in our presence.
We shared a ragged devotion—seduced
by the sound of our voices shouting,
a way to avoid our own smallness.

We vowed to keep each other
up—stared at the factory's flat
roof and believed light clung
to us like sweat, wanting what
was overflowing. Blades of grass

tossed in the air or tied around
our fingers. A collective breath
from our wet mouths, our belief
in a constant geometry.

The Bees Are Disappearing

In Pennsylvania, summer heat stretches
Into October, but cold comes on fast
Like a sting. The bees are leaving
Hives. I paint the basement yellow, like
July was long ago, but still we drive together
To his sister in the hospital and he doesn't
Speak to me. There has been a shift
In priorities. We listen to the radio, a report
The bees are disappearing, at night
I lie in bed and think of people I love
More than him. They have disappeared
Too. I have been taken

By a man I never knew, driven across
A bridge and back again. Made to love
A family that would come to
Resent me. Everything increases,
all around. My parents buy up
Houses, one by one. My mother loves
Blue shingles, shutters, gardens filled with
Poppies filled with ants.

After the hospital, his sister requires one floor
For her wheelchair, my parents offer
a house, a cat, my mother offers her
Time. Our families—his and mine—
Quickly collapsing. The bees, they say, are still
Disappearing along with the property lines
In my neighborhood, a compound of people
I love, all in a row My friend's baby learning to
Walk—they say she may never. It will be a year
In July, he and I are moving in together.
We found a big apartment, but I'm still looking
For some place small enough to see.

Ninetieth Letter to Texas

So this is how it feels to be abandoned.
I have been waiting for you
all morning. The grass has been wet
with dew, dried, and wet again
with rain. The morning glories
have opened and shut.

The sound of water in the gutters
fills my ears, and I am a portrait
of longing: toes stretched expectantly
towards the door, hair grown long
with waiting. I have grown tired
of waiting.

How is it there, in the heat of Texas?
Do the cacti swell and gulp at the passing
of a cloud? Do you remember me as the last
rain before leaving? Have your hands
cracked in the sun?

Tonight, as every other night, I will sit
on the patio and watch as night creeps
into the garden. I will listen to the crickets sing
their song of longing, and I will wait for them
to stop.

Cinderella, with All of Her Names for Servitude

I.

How have I come here, with these thorns?
I was royal. The blue satin of the bedroom
vanished. Replaced by the straw of the broom.
At night I whisper cadence. The striking
of drums. I dream of cracking egg shells
and the yolk's slow descent. Most of this
is waiting. The chores become by mantra.
I ache with the thrill of possibility.

II.

Carry yourself with a certainty that starts
in your bones and stretches out past your
skin. Turn your body into mine. I will absorb
the longing. I will free myself for you.

III.

I have been reduced to something less
than myself, and in that way, I have grown.
A sudden mouthful of rain. The gripping
pain of my body. I want to escape through
my tongue. I want to escape through my eyelids.
Instead, I am left here in this body. Death—
the departure I long to be.

Creature

The morning is heavy. The skin
between my breasts thins like cloth.

Spells and tightness of breath. The anxious
creature edging out. I am learning

to carry two buckets from the well:
great boulders beneath me.

Strength is unpredictable.
If only I could sculpt the hills

to ease my passing. I miss the best
light of the afternoon. From the top,

I watch the day settle in and go.
I am entering another kind of silence.

The sharp corners of doubt—
bitter fruit in my mouth.

Desire peaks.
It all escapes me.

Evening and a slow kind of ache.
I wrap my ankles. When I fall,

the ground reaches—tries to claim me.
I forfeit the armor of my self.

This dark earth—a live thing,
an appetite that swallows.

This Is My Holiest Hour

I wake before the sky turns.
The day waits, wanting,

but inside the yellowed kitchen,
I forget to breathe. Dust

filters in through the screen door.
The planks in the floor are rich with it.

Every morning, I stand
near the road to meet it.

I have no use for the word *abandon*.
I am unblinking. I am

a bottomless vessel.
I am a wooden plank.

Hunger Moon

He says years are only for counting, but
at some point, we stopped kissing
on the mouth. Years like acres of wood.
Trees cut—years we needed the money.
Silt runs down off the hill where the trees
used to be, turns the bathwater gritty
& gray. On the front porch, moths
still dance. The floodlight imitates
the moon. On the back porch, a damp
rotting woodpile. He showed me how to count
years by the rings in the trunk, but
he didn't need to show me how to count.
Years by leaves in the gutters,
by the space between us in bed.