

# Beekeeper's Boy

Robert Adámy Duisberg

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I'm new at doing this on my own. But already I've seen amazing things, just watching how bees cluster and move. Then suddenly they'll flow, a line like a rivulet of water just a few bees wide, many small minds following some higher thought known to them only in common and to none alone.

There were warm spring days as a boy in the bee yard. I was there with my father, not because I wanted to be but because I was told to help. Though my father lived and worked a life of the mind, he imagined himself salt of the earth, and was determined that such earthiness be a part of my upbringing. I was expected to prepare the equipment, as we were smoking the hives before opening them. If bees smell smoke in the wild, they reflexively engorge themselves on honey, in case their tree catches fire and they need to flee. In that state they're not aggressive. So my father often worked the hives with a burning cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The smoke had no such calming effect on him.

"So you need to learn the hard way again? Damn it! How many times do I have to tell you not to hold it that way? Here. Give me that!"

As his arm swung out, I just let go, and he snatched the burning smoker from my hand.

“Hold it level or the ash’ll put your flame out. And pump it! Don’t just dangle it around. You’re handling fire. Now shape up!”

He took the hot metal of the burning smoker in a bare, calloused hand. I watched for him to wince and drop it. But he held it without noticing, as if the fire of his anger overwhelmed any sensation of burning.

I looked away and saw a bee marching onto the landing board in front of the hive door. She arched her back and sprang into humming flight. I watched her rise, circle once, twice around my head, her melismatic hum a melody rising, spiraling upward into light. She then shot toward a patch of purple thistle in the next yard, a dot of vibrating enthusiasm vanishing in the middle distance of an afternoon sky. Following her flight I felt a space open up into refuge, and in that space the melody of flight expanded into song for me.

*Music, let me leave this place  
And dislocate myself from space  
A line of song attaining grace  
To lead my soul along.*

I yielded to the lilt of incantation, humming as much to the bees as to myself. I let the tune unwind in ways to harmonize their humming, to bear me away with them.

“What the hell are you day-dreaming about? Snap out of it. Here!” My father scowled, as he thrust the bee smoker back at me.

He had pumped a few perfunctory puffs of cool, grey smoke into the door and under the lid of the hive. He wanted to have a look inside because he was afraid “the girls” were outgrowing their boxes and might be getting ready to swarm. He had an amateur’s innocence about what he might be looking for, along with a confidence that he would recognize whatever it was when he saw it, perhaps the building of new queen cells, or

simply too many bees. He never wore gloves or a beekeeper's veil. He would have nothing to do with such folderol. "What's the matter? Afraid of a little sting?" I took the smoker and backed away as he got ready to open up the hive.

Watching him work I remembered his telling of once trying to hive a swarm that had come to rest on a low-hanging branch of one of his trees. He had read about being able to shake a swarm into a hive so that the bees feel at home and settle right in, and it seemed straight forward enough. So he placed a hive box with a few fresh comb frames in it on the ground under the swarm and proceeded to lop the branch with a pair of pruners. Most of the bees did fall into the box, but the falling of the branch was not as gentle as it could have been. He didn't have the hive cover at hand, and by the time he could set the branch down, pick the cover up and move to enclose the bees, things had already gotten out of control. With a collective roar the bees ballooned out of the box into a cloud around him.

I imagine that the sound must have been thrilling but not threatening, as it reached an elevated intensity. Hundreds of bees sped by his head, each buzzing tone making its Doppler drop, the falling pitch like a shifting vowel, as if each bee sang out "Hay-ohh!" as she flew by. Even though he wore no veil, they didn't alight and he was not stung, but instead the great humming cloud rose in the air and hovered on a level with the crowns of the citrus trees. There the swarm remained for long minutes diffuse as the air, each insect scarcely visible in its speed. They were like a quality of the light, a mere shimmering excitation of space.

As if sounding a new note, the humming abruptly changed. The cluster drew in on itself until it was a small fraction of its earlier size. Then it began to move. Slowly, directly and purposefully out of my father's yard, around the house, and down the road, the coherent cloud floated unhurriedly away.

The swarm took up residence in a new bee box that happened to be sitting open at the side of a neighbor's garage down the road. "Lucky dumb son of a bitch!" my father swore. Thing was, I'm pretty sure my father may have tried to use some old box to lure them into, one from a previous year's hive which had failed. Perhaps the swarm had already found his box to have been sullied. He certainly didn't believe in luck anyway.

Not luck, but "good management." He had worked his way through medical school driving a taxi back East. He drove aggressively ever after, as if battling big city traffic, even while raising his family in an mostly rural, old Phoenix neighborhood of citrus groves and horse pastures just beginning to be built into suburbs. He had started medical practice during the Great Depression and told of being paid with a loaf of bread or a chicken. Drafted as a doctor into the War, it was only there that he became a psychiatrist, what he would only ever after call "a shrink." His therapy was shaped by this provenance: "What most of them need is just a kick in the ass and to stop feeling sorry for themselves." And remarkably, this sometimes seemed true. Or at least there were enough people whom he'd treated that way who had revived their lives and felt ever grateful. Some became friends, touched somehow by the generosity underlying his brusque care.

He taught us to view the world as rational, mechanical, knowable in all its detail, and this vision was devoid of any mystery or awe. But what then could be the purpose or meaning of a life? If I had the courage to ask, he would answer that the question itself was a kind of "wishful thinking," expressing nothing but "an infantile need."

What was left for me in the nihilism of such a clockwork universe was an emptiness, and into this emptiness music sang to me. There was a longing like a low humming background in my thoughts, the sort of sound you'd hear on a cold winter's day if you put your ear against a hive, listening for life. Ours was a home without music, so with my first experiences in a concert hall as a teenager, the sound propelled me through sweetness and

anguish into awe, and I was called. Lines of song would lead my voice; I could no more choose to not hear them and follow than decide not to hunger. I remember the sound of my father's growl years later, when I dropped out of engineering to pursue my music, "Aw, you're a damned fool!"

Like songlines leading through a landscape's story, bees' lines of song, the ever-falling thirds of their buzz streaking by, lead their swarm. My father's swarm migrated following its own music to find a new home in the box down the road. There the "lucky dumb" fellow kept his hives neatly in a row beneath a shed, with a tin roof to keep off the baking Phoenix sun. And they were carefully placed facing toward the east so that they would be warmed in the morning, since desert nights could often be cold. All of that was too fussy for my father, who had no intention of "emulating that anal-retentive bastard." So when I was in high school he came up with the notion of setting his hives back in under the aprons of our citrus trees, the remnants of the grapefruit orchards into which the houses on our lane had been built. The trees were a dense tangle of branches behind the waxy wall of their leaves, and the aprons often went clear to the ground. It became my job to get in under there with a handsaw and pruning tools to clear out something like a cave into the foliage, opening toward the south east, but deep enough so that my father could put a hive in and have enough room to work around it.

Of course, I couldn't be trusted. While I crawled in under the bushy tree, he stood outside in the full sun. From the dark heart of the tree I could see out and watch him leaning, peering in, his hand up shielding his brow from the sun as he squinted.

The inside of a citrus canopy is a sheltered space. For the kids growing up in our neighborhood, the area had been full of "secret tunnels" we'd chase through, connecting back yards under arching hedges of oleander and pomegranate and rows of compact citrus trees. This tree was like that, and I looked up through the intricate space-filling network

of branches, trying to see what would fall if I cut. My eye traced out the tangled limbs toward the shape of the shell of leaves that would break away with a severed branch.

“There!”

“What?”

“There, by your elbow.”

“What?”

“Cut there!”

It was ludicrous for him to think he could see what he was ordering me to do. From his vantage of sweating squint, he certainly couldn't look up into that darkened, branching filigree to see the connections of his choices out to the crowning leaves. When the barked and bullying orders were so clearly uninformed, a sense of injustice rose in me like heat.

“No. I don't think you want...”

“Whadyou mean, ‘No’?”

“But if I cut there...”

“Do as I say!”

*Do as I say.* As if he thought I'd no mind of my own, his wrath effaced all else.

“But you can't even see from out there.”

“The hell. You do as I say!”

“But seriously, the whole back half of the crown will...”

“Damn it! Will you or will you not...” and with that he began to thrash his way in at me. I knew with certainty he would not stop, cared not at all to rein in rage before it ran

its course. But the thick and thorny branching prevented entry so directly and held him back. With fear of getting trapped against the trunk, I dove under a branch and crawled out the back side of the tree.

I marched back around the tree, spitting out, “Jesus then! Do it yourself!” I threw the saw. I didn’t intend to throw it actually at him, more like in his direction, for him to use. But I mirrored his anger with a flash of my own that flooded my sight in a blinding blaze. So in starting away I flung my indignation along with the saw, and the blade caught him on the upper arm.

I froze with horror unsure what had just happened, and watched him calmly peruse the droplets of blood that promptly rose on his punctured triceps. Then he turned that narrowed gaze on me and advanced.

“Come here, you little shit!”

I ducked toward the hive as he came reaching after me. I dodged as his arm swung, but he caught and grabbed my shirt in a claw. I tugged, and he held, so I dove behind the boxes, and his arm slammed up into the hive. As I dove, both his weight and mine heaved into the stack, three deep-boxes high, all balanced on top of some bricks. Then the hive’s stack leaned, and at first I leaned back, trying to keep them between him and me. But as my father stumbled, the tower toppled past where it was stable.

In that instant I dashed, since he’d had to let go as he fell forward onto the hive, and I got out from under the boxes as they tumbled and spilled out their delicate frames and comb. But breaking his fall, his hand went right through the molten stickiness. I can still hear the splintering crack of the pine frames, that bright percussion, followed quickly by the full-throated roar of the angry cloud that arose from the wreckage.

I ran without thinking, without looking back, as the bees also came out at me. I scarcely saw where I went, pursued by a ferocity of sound leaning hard into accented grace notes, each aggressive *appoggiatura* shooting by my ears. Driven or led, I ended up in bushes far from home. There I stayed. I didn't go back for several days, hiding out mostly in the secret tunnels. I spent some nights on the floor of a friend's house who, worried as much for himself as for me, let me in the back door furtively after dinner.

Within a few days the swelling went down on my father's neck and face, and the small cuts cleared up. He never said anything about what had happened. Perhaps he actually felt responsibility for his temper, but he'd be damned if he would admit it. Instead he treated me with a kind of cold, grudging respect, as if standing up to him made me someone to be reckoned with. I felt in response, even while still on my guard, a peculiar confidence from that, like a strength, an alarming heritage, transmitted though almost reluctantly accepted. I knew I would be all right.

I didn't spend much time at home after that. More often I took my guitar to the streets, and fell in with a cohort that seemed to flow with a swarming all its own. *Hay-ohh! Lead me on!* It wasn't long before I left, to follow the music west and north.

It's here in the Northwest I've taken up beekeeping myself, many years later now in this cooler, kinder climate. My first season was a cold wet spring, so I fed my new hives with sugar water during their early months. Sometimes as I refilled the sugar feeders, I'd stand still as bees circled and darted around me, and that was fine because they were all only interested in the sweet. Perhaps they began to recognize me in a way I can hardly imagine. Or maybe I've just grown to feel more comfortable with them. I've learned to gently pry a comb frame loose from the sticky propolis without having it bump and get



them worked up. And I've found if I pull the frame out slowly, they will cling to each other and then gently let go, not getting upset. They seem docile now, even tolerant of me, almost appreciative.

At first I wore all the protection. I started out with my new gear just so, the hood, cotton clothing in light colors, cotton gloves. No leather or dark colors; the bees might take you for a bear, and explode out, defending the hive from ravage. It seems like each time I've been stung, I have less of a reaction. Once last year, a bee got up inside the hood with me. The poor girl just got stuck between my shirt and the fringe of the hood and crawled up inside. By the time I figured out where she was, she'd stung in the soft of my temple, close to my eye, which swelled almost shut.

My desire to make a home here finds me wanting to know the mind of hives. I spend a lot of time sitting with my bees now, watching them go and come back, their bloomers laden bright orange and yellow, the quick conversations among antennae at the entrance. What do they say? I've heard it said that bees don't hear well, but I'm not so sure. As I sit I find myself humming to them again, like I used to.

It's been decades since my father's quiet passing on. He had claimed that his own death was an event of no consequence, and by insisting on an absence of any sentiment or ceremony he was determined to keep it that way. But the memory of his working the bees with bare hands, his exposed face sweating, lingers in my own bee yard. It seemed almost a matter of course that I decided at one point to work without the hood. The veil is cumbersome, and besides it's hard to get a good look at what's going on through the mosquito mesh. Practical reasons aside, it became an act of remembrance accompanied by strains of almost forgotten hymn rising in my breath.

It was a day in early summer last season, and I wanted to check how my bees were doing, to see whether I could put the feeders away. The cold damp had finally broken and we were getting our first flush of warmth. It seemed so long since the sun had felt actually hot on my face. So when it came time to suit up, I decided that this was the moment to do without the hood and the gloves too. I still smoked the hive, but lightly. It was as though if I were going to trust them, I should do so completely.

Pouring sugar water into feeders outside the hive is one thing. Taking the hive apart and pulling out frames is another. A beekeeper is supposed to “inspect the brood,” but as an amateur like my father, I had scant idea starting out of what I should be looking for. I’m getting a little near-sighted too, so as I pulled a frame and was looking it over, turning it slowly, I found myself peering closely into the cells for the tiny, curled, white brood, larvae much smaller than grains of rice. My cheek must have gotten just inches away from the comb. Suddenly several bees shot up and hit my face. But I was holding a frame covered with a few thousand other bees. The startling jolt I felt flashed into my face and mind, but my reaction seemed frozen out by the need to not jump or drop the frame. I held on.

The bees had actually landed on my cheek. I could feel their feet as they walked about, though I don’t how many there were, maybe two, it seemed like six. It took a lot of effort to keep breathing slowly and to move the frame smoothly back into the hive. The girls on my face kept crawling. Finally when I had my hands free I was able to brush gently, slowly, with the back of my hand, and they flew away. I hadn’t been stung. It was only then that my heart raced ahead, and I moved off to sit down in the grass and catch my breath in the sun.

I haven’t handled a swarm yet, so I can only imagine what really goes on in one, but this much I know: when a hive grows to a certain size the workers build special cells and raise new queens. The old queen takes flight and alights in the landscape somewhere near.

About half of her daughters fly as well to attend her there, and the swarm condenses, a writhing multitude on a tree branch. Through this mitosis the hive achieves a kind of immortality, its genes revitalized and carried forward in the new queen. The swarm then decides where to go. A decision develops before they fly.

Scouts go out from the waiting swarm, messengers into the world seeking the world's message. They follow their own discovery, alighting on what strikes attention, lingering in places of interest, the ones that seem promising. And more go out, and where they linger they gather, and where they gather they become a number. It becomes a matter of their number, as if they could count, because when enough of them linger, when the place is so promising, they come to know their number and something triggers. Suddenly together the decision is known. *This is the place.*

It is easy to pretend to a “scientific” view and regard bees as little machines, programmed by their queen to serve her in their propagation. “They’re just bugs, for Chrissake,” I can hear my father saying. This fit well with his outlook — behavioristic, determined and full of instinct. And seeing his own limiting mortality, he would have denied a hive’s deathlessness in its germ line. But it’s not like that. A hive, a mind, is more mysterious, more musical, and songs linger in souls.

My father lacked a vision of mind as emergent. But a swarm comes to know on its own as a whole, each bee an active cell in the knowing. And that knowing takes the shape of the cloud, and is expressed in the motion of each cell, each bee. For after the scouts have sensed their threshold number, which becomes the knowledge of home, they return to the rest of the seething mass on the branch. Like sensory tentacles sent into the world, they return informed, and the meaning of their message develops by dances and scents throughout; the decision takes hold of the whole. They fly.

But where? And how do they find their way? And how am I to find mine? As an airborne swarm becomes a shimmering shape aloft, the scouts begin to lead. Flying much faster than others' hovering, these few who know the way flash straight through the floating cloud in the direction of their goal, bending back around as if on lines of force and shooting through again, each time entraining others to follow their falling tune toward home. The swarming multitude are slowly drawn forward, led by the meteoric flight of the knowing few. Let me hear that calling and its answer singing in my heart. *Hay-ohh! Lead me on!*