

## Bliss

by Todd Davis

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

—William Butler Yeats

My great grandfather, Fleming Jefferson Davis, grew fruit trees in central Kentucky, on the road half-way between Grab and Donansburg, two orchards to be exact, with Lincoln pears, Elberta peaches, and all manner of apples, including Red Junes, Maiden Blush, Sapsucker, and Northern Spy. With so many blossoms to tend, none of which could bear fruit unless pollinated, he also kept bees.

Passion ought to be fragrant, don't you think, trussed up like a young girl trying to catch her date's attention at the first school dance? But in this section of Kentucky virtually every Davis was born, raised, and died a Separate Baptist, which meant that passion and pleasure and dancing were suspect.

Can you imagine spring in those orchards: white and pink blossoms thrown to the ends of branches like confetti, the faint syrupy smell of possibility, and the sound of bees everywhere? I've often wondered if this was the way my Puritan ancestors winked at God, immersing themselves in the radical abundance of nature, cultivating it under the auspices of agriculture so no one would dare damn this profusion of sensual delights.

If you've never been stung, or if you've been stung but got over the fear of the swelling pinprick to recognize its necessity in keeping the world spinning, then you know the movement of bees should hold no dread, that their dance may be the most beautiful to witness, if you're willing to take the time to lay under the trees, head turned to the sky and to the profusion of blossoms that appear to hold the heavens in their rightful place.

There's a fluidity to bee flight, a languid rhythm to their comings and goings. Nothing overly choreographed: part ballet, part waltz. No tango or salsa here, despite their costuming and their tiny bee hips swaying back and forth in provocation.

Yet there's no denying that this dance—despite its loveliness, its bodily gratification—bears a purpose. A certain kind of love drives these creatures in their persistence, enabling their single-minded vision. Who can glimpse the pollen these bees store on their legs—so sticky and heavy at times that flight becomes difficult—without confess-

ing an odd passion stirring the blood? Who can hear the hum of what Yeats called a “bee-loud glade” and not remember the thirst of one’s own yearning for this solace, a constant craving to taste the sugar of this world’s offering, to drink until full, then to move on to another flower, only to thirst again?

I wonder if my great grandfather considered such matters. I know my grandfather and father did on their walks at the Pierce farm, listened to them philosophizing about the woods, about the absurdity of plentitude and lack, and so it’s my birthright to ask: Where did this dancing lead? What was the conclusion of this bee-laden love-making, this world-making, which took place in a remote orchard nearly a century ago?

Some of those rhythms culminated in the waxen comb which Fleming would slice with a butcher knife: whetted edge dripping with honey the color of a wheat field, the bees having fled from the clouds he poured out of his kettle-shaped smoker. Yes, bee-dancing brought the hive’s harvest, but it also went into the making of a white peach my father now can’t remember the name for, a fruited ecstasy he’s scoured farm stands, garden catalogs, and produce aisles in search of the past sixty years with no luck.

He says that particular kind of peach was large and came on in July when the heat was beginning to weigh on everyone. He’s told me that slicing into one of those midsummer globes, watching the paring knife undo the velvet of its skin and the first drop of juice sliding down onto thumb’s tip was pure pleasure, a sanctioned hedonism that could not be overturned despite the church’s best efforts. It was summer’s hellish heat undone by a bliss that tasted like honey tinged with apples and pears, a sweetness that was like staring at the sun through the leaves while kissing a girl from the next farm over who kissed you back even harder.