

If Bees

I. Then She Lifts Herself Gingerly to See Whether She Truly Can Use Her Wings

If one loves bees one writes of them persuadingly
If one wishes to produce honey
If one begins in the spring
If the reader will examine
If one is inventive
If one is a social philosopher
If willing to give a modicum of time and care to the happy little creatures
If one sees behind a bee-veil
If proper care be given
If there is plenty of nectar and pollen to be had
If one were heroic enough to try it
Then she lifts herself gingerly to see whether she truly can use her wings

II. Then Her Last Thought is Not For Self

If one were able to find the queen in the clustering swarm
(If we wish to find her, she is usually present:
If only two bands are evident, she is a hybrid
If three distinct translucent bands can be seen, pure Italian)
If they wish her to come out, they rush to assist her
If there is much to do she is untiring and unremitting
As if she were thoroughly enjoying herself
As if the sun itself had exhaled
If, in her promenade, she discovers another full-grown queen, a contest ensues
If need be, secreting wax, if need be, ready to defend her colony at the cost of her life
Then her hard-worked wings begin to fray at the edge
Then her last thought is not for self

III. If There is No Orchard, What Then?

If salt be added to the water
If put in too soon and the weather is warm
If the weather is warm and the bees seem uneasy

If you see a web upon the comb
If the bees seem unsettled and unhappy
If there is not sufficient food
If there is no fresh water
If any such seem distended and swollen
If it had found life worthless somehow
If not checked
If precaution is not taken
If there is no orchard, what then?

IV. Then There Must Be Such a Thing as Flower Wisdom

If the law be broken
If we wait until too late
If precaution is not taken
As if really accomplishing something
If we did not
If there is any doubtful point the bees are ready to help elucidate it
If the hexagonal pattern were in the bee brain
If to live up to their mathematical reputation
If they awaken and push out and try to escape in great number
If it were a drifting cloud instead of a self-willed, one-minded colony of socialists, how the
 heart rises and sinks inversely to this rise and fall and how hopeless it seems when the
 swarm lifts itself superbly over all surrounding obstacles
Then disappears above the tree tops
Then there must be such a thing as flower wisdom

ABOUT THE POEM

“If Bees” was created from Anna Botsford Comstock’s *How to Keep Bees* (1905). About the piece and the process of composing it, Marietta Brill writes:

“If Bees” is a series of 12-line poems extracted from *How to Keep Bees: A Handbook for Beginners* by Anna Botsford Comstock.

I was instantly entranced by the language, as clear-headed and lyrical as a bee. Somehow, this instruction manual was never boring.

The four centos are also ersatz sonnets. The first 10 or 11 lines of each poem begin with “If” or “As if.” I liked the droning repetition. And I liked these conditional fragments to express the fragile uncertainty of our bee population due to climate change, an underlying theme. The 12th and final line of each poem contains “then,” serving as the sonnet’s volta and giving the poem some sense of resolution—which I think is how bees would like it.

I changed some words (but not “if” or “then”) of the original text for continuity.

These poems are adapted from an existing work in progress, a crown of sonnets, also called “If Bees.”



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