

Bee Journal

by Sean Borodale



To follow Sean Borodale's progress through his publication record is to trace the coming into being of a poet. A visual artist by training, Borodale's first book was *Notes for an Atlas*, a 370 page topographical work written on walks round London and described by Robert Macfarlane as 'an extraordinary poem' but it wasn't until the debit-billed [Bee Journal](#) that Borodale was classified specifically as a poet. Next year, Cape is to publish his *Human Work (a poet's cookbook)*, a collection of poems written 'live' among the pots and pans of a working domestic kitchen.

28th February

Do I dare to trust... these pets? They are not that.
Now as the rain skims down through rattled air
the last dead things, like skeletons of stones,
catch on my feet: *bee-friend*, the late dead things,
the skeleton of Christmas, fireworks of midnights vaporised,
the awkward purposeless haste of visitors...
These bees are visitors, how long they last, our guess.
The skeleton of song, the robin's cry note entering the bees.
Time very arthritic; the clock's joints ache.
Black bees, like models made of tar and grit, get stuck.
The queen inside them all; they, wall and bedding, cluster
walls' eyes, measuring and smelling, fitting...

7th August: Property

A frame of honeycomb is in the kitchen:
Just a candle, vigil, out of respect.
It's like a body I visit
Laid on the table's midnight.

The smell is first; under its pinewood resin
The smell of light is in a miracle:
I – criminal – touch

Its tear-easy skin of skeletal reef.
(Best use of space from minimal effort.)

No waste for them, just work,
And days of nectar flow are nearing end.

Flowers are here, springs of them,
Wells and weightless drops of briefest sex;
A wax shroud turned down at its corners;
A dead skin most beautifully scented,
Drawn out of dark.

When touched,
Observe the way
That light swells in the crack
And golden-eyes.

But it is cold,
I paid for it with hooks across my flesh.

10th February: Queen

I keep the queen, she is long in my hand,
her legs slightly pliant;
folded, dropped down, wings flat
that flew her mating flight
to the sun and back, full of spermatozoa, dronesong.
She was made mechanically ecstatic.
I magnify what she is, magnify her skews and centres.
How downy she is, fur like a fox's greyness, like a thistle's mane.
Wings perfect, abdomen subtle in shades of brittle;
her rear legs are big in the lens;
feet like hung anchors are hooks for staying on cell-rimms.
Veins in her wings are a rootwork of rivers,
all echo and interlace. This is her face, compound eye.
I look at the slope of her head, the mouth's proboscis;
her thin tongue piercing is pink as cut flesh, flash glass.
Some hairs feather and split below the head.
Those eyes are like castanets, cast nets;
woman all feral and ironwork, I slip
under the framework, into the subtle.
The wing is jointed at the black leather shoulder.
I wear it, I am soft to stroke, the lower blade fans.
Third generation queen of our stock,
you fall as I turn. I hold your hunchback;
a carcase of lightness, no grief, part animal, part flower.

Discussion Ideas

- '28th February' – 'these pets? They are not that.' Where are the lines drawn between working and companion animals, livestock and pets? Honey can be bought from a shop; bees don't know their owners ... why keep bees? Does this poem hint at the reasons you might have for being a small scale beekeeper in the early twenty first century? Have you ever been tempted to raise bees yourselves?
- '7th August: Property' – 'I paid for it with hooks across my flesh' – do we pay enough for honey, financially or symbolically? Are there missing words implied by the title of this poem, if so, might they be '... is Theft'?

- '10th February: Queen' – what's happening in the line 'I wear it, I am soft to stroke, the lower blade fans.'?
- Alice Oswald says of this book "These are pre-poems, note-poems dictated by phenomena. Their context is bees, but their subject (intriguingly) is Time ...' What do you think?
- If you've read the whole of *Bee Journal*, how was the experience? How did it relate to the reading of other journals or diaries you may have read? Did you read it more like a work of natural history or science? Have you ever kept a journal yourself? What is its intended readership?

Sean Borodale works as a poet and artist, making scriptive and documentary poems written on location; this derives from his process of writing and walking for works such as *Notes for an Atlas* (Isinglass, 2003) and *Walking to Paradise* (1999). He was selected for the Granta New Poets series in 2012 and his first collection of poetry, *Bee Journal* (Jonathan Cape, 2012), was a PBS Recommendation and was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize. His second collection, *Human Work*, is published in February 2015 by Jonathan Cape. He lives in Somerset and is currently Creative Writing Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge.

<http://www.seanborodale.com/>

Other books by Sean Borodale

- [*Notes from an Atlas*](#) (Faber, 2007)

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