Intimate Detail

By Heid E. Erdrich

Late summer, late afternoon, my work interrupted by bees who claim my tea, even my pen looks flower-good to them. I warn a delivery man that my bees, who all summer have been tame as cows, now grow frantic, aggressive, difficult to shoo from the house. I blame the second blooms come out in hot colors, defiant vibrancy—unexpected from cottage cosmos, nicotianna, and bean vine. But those bees know, I'm told by the interested delivery man, they have only so many days to go. He sighs at sweetness untasted.

Still warm in the day, we inspect the bees. This kind stranger knows them in intimate detail. He can name the ones I think of as shopping ladies. Their fur coats ruffled up, yellow packages tucked beneath their wings, so weighted with their finds they ascend in slow circles, sometimes drop, while other bees whirl madly, dance the blossoms, ravish broadly so the whole bed bends and bounces alive.

He asks if I have kids, I say not yet. He has five, all boys. He calls the honeybees his girls although he tells me they’re ungendered workers who never produce offspring. Some hour drops, the bees shut off. In the long, cool slant of sun, spent flowers fold into cups. He asks me if I’ve ever seen a Solitary Bee where it sleeps. I say I’ve not. The nearest bud’s a long-throated peach hollyhock. He cradles it in his palm, holds it up so I spy the intimacy of the sleeping bee. Little life safe in a petal, little girl, your few furious buzzings as you stir stay with me all winter, remind me of my work undone.


Source: The Mother’s Tongue (Salt Publishing, 2005)