Eréndira Ramírez-Ortega

Years Eaten by the Bees

1

In sixth grade, I learned that male drones had extra-large eyes, the better to see the queen bee with—that trophy mate larger than all the others in the nest, that coveted partner that would eventually breed with other males—and these drones, after scoring with the queen, would in due course have their reproductive parts ripped out of them before dropping to their death. I recall a beehive in the backyard of our duplex home, a prominent colony which I never forgot because the memory of friends lasts just as long as a swarm of bees. It was the first time I witnessed them mill through sweet nectar, drones and workers, emerging from their colonies, distinctly with one thing in mind. I'd watch as withered leaves anchored on the limbs of trees would fall with a brush of wind, tumbling and tripping over crooked branches made straight with the crack of pressure from God. I was a twig unfettered, the sap plucked from a leaf, the blade of a split node rubbed through curious fingers.

I could see the hive as I looked out of my bedroom window then, drawing apart the two panels of voile drapes that smelled of mildew. In all its atrociousness, it seemed beautiful to me. So lovely were the catacombs, those hexagon cells layered horizontally, a pattern so entrancing as my lips formed a daily counting drill with the tip of my finger in the air, putting me in a daze, hypnotized between its rooms and ridges, those passages of commotion transparent in the morning light of that summer. I'd inch my way to it, waiting for an intermittent pause to grant me permission to pass it by and climb the magnolia tree next to it. Decades later, a beehive is what I'd show my nephew, Ezra, when he'd come to visit me, during one of his extended stays at my parent's house.

2

This was my sentence, my milieu, my catacomb.

I was busy in the best way I knew how, given what I could do with myself at that age, with all that I had to occupy my mind and time with. Vacation

Bible School took place every summer at our church and my brother Abel, who knew all the boys there, ran with them in a swagger that seemed effortless but contagious. They were already in eighth grade and were veterans of VBS. They helped with something or other but were mainly there to get relief from the arid temperature in their homes. They were kind to me but maintained a code I couldn't break into no matter how close in age we were.

The church was an old Craftsman that sloped on the corner of an Oakland ghetto, a place where all the mothers and fathers spoke Spanish but whose kids responded in English. We sang hymns and memorized scripture, and we culminated our program that week in the summer with a costume production on the church stage: Christ healing the lame, the blind, and destitute. Our parents sat in the pews poised with Kodak cameras topped by blue flash cubes rotating like cosmic stars.

I knew many people in our small church. New visitors were quickly given a contact form to fill out. They visited a few times before vanishing like raindrops on windshields. I knew the names of some members, I recognized faces, but they didn't know me well, other than whose brother I was and whose son I belonged to. I would climb the oak tree on the highest slope of the church where no one could see me look down at them. On my watch as I would wait for the church bell, I noticed them hesitate to greet each other, a repugnant aroma of musk rising from the tops of women's elaborately coiffed hair. Teen girls scrambled through their purses for a stick of gum and let the foil wrap slip out of their fingers and into the breeze to litter the margins of the neighborhood.

As a sixth grader, I had bony elbows. I wore a checker collared shirt and tie to church on Sundays. The girls there took notice of me in a way that I liked, and I was good at making sure I looked sharp before leaving the house since I agonized about my hair and nose. I had a thick flat top, and my nose was an awkward distraction. I knew I was sought after by the girls who would boldly ask my mom where I was when they wouldn't see me around.

The enrichment program I was going to be enrolled in for middle school would shroud my insecurity. I would find myself among those who wouldn't test my character, but who would rather give me praise and regale me as the competent person that I was. And my brother wouldn't be a part of that circle, as it would be all mine to inhabit, all mine to plant myself into and bloom.

Our duplex was about two miles from the government school I walked to and from every day. I walked alone the year I was in sixth grade, as my brother had begun middle school and had no contact with me throughout the day until bedtime, or at dinner. It was a walk that in moments was serene whenever I passed meadows of tumbleweed, or the empty, abandoned lots of a gas station, or an old row of houses that had no remedy but to pass the time in decay. It was an offense to my eyes, these neighborhoods distinguished with cracks and sidewalk potholes that sprung creeping spurges like carpets under my feet, purple and green, dry and menacing. When I came across those innocuous plants that begged for my mercy, I would bend down and rip them from their roots and toss them into the wind overhead, a sticky milk smearing my hand. I would keep my knuckles in a fist, gripping the residual of my victory away from my clothes, and make my way home to wash away the evidence. These sites during my walks interfered with the sounds of birds looking for food, as they were a nuisance, their grave state of disrepair—windows boarded up with plywood, beds of weeds strewn with trash and all sorts of litter beaten by hours of sun, graffiti attributing to all its decline.

3

My parents were never home when I arrived from school. My brother rode his bike but would stay a bit longer at school to mess around with the guys he knew, knuckleheads that had no ambition but for keeping average grades and filling their schedules with activities that promised new friends, popularity, or candid photos in yearbooks. Only on one occasion can I recall coming home to see my mother in the kitchen, the darkness of the house lifted by a breeze that only the air of autumn could undress. Her cooked food waiting on the stove for me was a pleasant surprise, since I only ate sandwiches for lunch that I'd prepare for myself the night before. That day she had refried beans slathered on gorditas topped with ground beef and lettuce and tomato and cheese. I never did ask her why she was home early that afternoon because seeing her there with hot food ready to give me shattered the isolation I was accustomed to, causing me to forget my tedious day and the pain in my legs overheated with the pulse of ennui.

My mother had started working only a few years earlier after having stayed home most of our formative years, and she agreed to let my brother and I walk

to school every morning, alone, while she would tend to our nest, doting on my father's every need. It was a reprieve from the toil, my mother being home for those years, but we all went through a crisis of melancholy when her cabin fever came to an end, when her care and concern for us began to dwindle after she started her new job. We were confounded during those few months that she expected us to do our beds in the morning, to pack our own lunches and sort our own laundry on Fridays, this work of her hands passed onto ours, the acrimony of her exhortations smothering us to the point of frustration. My father insisted that the extra income would help enlarge our coast, and eventually it carried us out of the duplex and under the roof of a mortgage that donned three bedrooms, a garage, a living room, a kitchen, a washroom, and a bathroom. A front yard too. Fenced.

My mother liked seeing me read a book, and as she sat quietly in the other room, sewing or hemming a pair of pants for my father, she'd often arise to regard me with a contemplation that would turn into an endearing gaze. It comforted her to know I was studious, to see with her own eyes that her sacrifice, and that of my father's, was bearing unspoiled fruit, and that languishing in their respective jobs—he a factory worker and she a hard assembly-line worker—proved profitable. She reeked of chemicals in the fibers of her mustard-colored uniform when she arrived home from her carpool with another lady that lived near us, and my father would stretch his calloused hands burned by the temperatures of the machinery he handled for hours through the day. Another trophy, he'd say to my mother, making fists and running them under warm water. His English was his greatest asset on the market block of his department, and a factor for advancement, especially since he worked overtime and never questioned his manager's directions.

I often questioned how someone like my mother could have married someone like my father. He'd been an alcoholic in his youth in Mexico, traveling to my mother's small town looking for work and finding her there selling some craft or other artesanía that her family displayed on colorful tarps of blue and green in the tianguis. He knew she would be his bride one day and when he left for the United States to live with his sister, he promised my mother in Mexico that he'd come back for her and bring her over. And that is how it was. They were married in her small town under the patio of a borrowed house and to this day, my father can barely remember the guests that attended the wedding, let alone

the taste of the two-tiered cake that was cut close to midnight. A year later, she boarded a bus with her documents, leaving siblings and aging parents behind, traveling for days to the U.S. with Abel—only two months old—wrapped in a linen blanket, and my father leading the way. When they arrived to the Bay Area, my mother's itching ears were greeted by the curt words of my father's sister: Women here work, you know, and they shed quickly what remained of their unhurried Mexican lives.

I had seen wedding photos of my parents, photos my mother doesn't hang on the wall nor present to us by happenstance during her annual purging of items in boxes and envelopes consigned to oblivion. It is only by force entry that I came upon them one day during intentional curiosity, to see what she kept in those obscure, dark corners of the house that never saw the day, these messages that weren't granted emancipation but that encumbered space which could have been filled with other relics.

One message that I could never hide in the dark corners of my reality was being Hispanic. In college, the word alone triggered great alarm to my ears, an elocution so frigid and terse, so jarring and brash, like breaking into a frozen lake, sinking beyond the untraceable deep where light never passes. Hispanic meant I was dark and that I wasn't American. It meant that I needed to tear its sheet of suffocation that disabled my movements.

4

My father was taken in by my Tía—his only sister—and her husband, a move to guard him from a fate in Mexico that would doom him to repeat the sins of the fathers and the fathers' fathers. He was a born-again Christian when he arrived with my mother and brother and held a very nascent control of his newfound faith.

We were close to my Tía, her husband, and her children. She celebrated our birthdays with much bravado, feeding us our favorite foods, letting us pick our birthday and Christmas gifts from the Service Merchandise catalog. We spent so much time there on weekends, our second home, albeit a Catholic home that made allowances for us to be rowdy, to let loose and to roam and hide, to laugh and squeal in clamor, to pretend we were outside of ourselves and our commanding fences. She had a bigger house than our duplex, and her kids were already in high school or out of school, working for themselves. Her stereo

covered the entire wall near the front door, a grandfather piece of furniture with doilies of floral crochets in bright orange or yellow. Her coffee tables were made of glass, trimmed in brass with porcelain miniatures of tea sets, or Victorian damsels and grooms courting each other flirtatiously at arm's length. Her couches were covered in plastic and the odor of her living room reminded me of a museum. The kitchen table was replete with food that made our hands tired after repeated servings: a bowl of Jell-O with ensnared slices of pineapple and strawberries, a tres leches cake too, devoured before morphing into a puddle of milk. We were the youngest of everyone present and my mother and father made a big deal about us, saying how proud they were of our continued good behavior at school, my father pausing after this remark, his eyes sagacious and brimming with approval.

Everardo is the top of his class, he'd say, and he's on the principal's honor roll again.

I would smile coyly, feigning humility, but relishing in the glory and praise I had expected from him, his bragging an assault to all other family conversation. As I recall those multiple instances when the spotlight would hit my eyelids, I can say that indeed it made me squint a bit, the glare of grandeur palpable for a moment yet an infinite stage away. It was only a matter of time that I would be favored beyond the foyer of my family's cell, beyond the awning of my skin and into a place where I would taste the sweet nectar of the worker bee that would indulge me with more adulation.

5

As I grew older, I looked more and more like my dad, his brown skin and dark eyes, his receding hairline diminishing the youth he arrived with to the U.S. I had a name that no one could pronounce correctly. My father named me after my Tía's husband as a response to the sound gratitude he felt in the marrow of his bones. It was a name so hard for many to pronounce, a name equally disconcerting to me as those cracks I would dodge on my walks home from school, unsettling depressions under my feet that I'd ruthlessly skip over. Everardo, I'd repeat over and over, only to frown when I'd hear how they stumbled over it, how blundered it was. Forget it, I thought one day after mulling over the idea to have them call me Ever, a disclosure that only came to my parent's attention at

an open house when they heard it from my teachers, when they saw it in cursive on my fifth-grade limericks gracing the top row of the bulletin board.

My parents never treated me the same after that. No longer was there the quietude of the ticking clock that cowed the tyranny over our dinner table. This overarching power I had mastered was a shout to the world that I was like them: that I was in charge of who I was going to be. Even though my parents continued to show me and my brother little affection, they never challenged my new identity.

Ever, my father said to himself in a hushed whisper on the way home that night after open house. His voice was dubbed with unseen amazement, his hands gripping the steering wheel of our Impala. My mother withheld any comment, explicit or implicit, but Abel, my brother Abel, shook his head at me in shame and snickered.

You're stupid, he said.

That night in the car, under the shadow of our mutual abhorrence, I wondered what would become of Abel when the years would bury all that we were at that moment, recalling my mother's authority over the clothes I'd wear in the earlier years of grammar school, an act based on whether she was able to find a matching set for my brother, or vice versa. It was such an infantile thing to do, to dress up like twins, as convincing as it was because we were so close in age.

I loathed the image of my brother, a reflection I fantasized blowing to smithereens with a fist, like the fist he would jolt through my stomach. I'd crouch to the ground and grind my teeth, quelling tears before wandering to my desk to read the books that would take me to another world, books that reflected my own face on the pages of yellow cellulose, brittle as ruined cotton. I read Hermann Hesse's *Augustus* and likened it to a parable of myself, an omen of what may be my life, of gaining everything and then losing it through tribulation, just to acquire that elusive happiness that could only be discovered not through good looks, or good health, or education, or wealth, or affection from friends, but rather through nothing at all. How I wrestled with the echoes of my family's silence, a habitual elegy of my existence that I could only dream of escaping when I became a man so that I could share my proper space with no single person from my family. I would be on my own, and little by little I was already taking steps toward that, making leaps from one place to the next, in succession,

erasing myself out of their lives, cutting their picture of me out of their frame, one limb at a time until nothing would remain of me.

6

The frosts of sorrow barrage me in the form of a visit from my nephew Ezra. He is Abel's first son, just four years old, when my mother calls to tell me he is visiting her for an extended stay. My mother asks politely if I want a visitor for a couple of hours, that it wouldn't be any trouble at all, that it would be nice if I could make some time, that swimming would be a fun thing for Ezra to do with me.

I am married now, just a few years, like Abel, and my mother's charitable voice is always the antidote to the perpetual rotting of my bones imparted by Mara. I agree to make time for this nephew of mine, who for the last two years reminded Mara of her closed womb but reminded me of the common relative we both share.

My mother brings lunch to not trouble Mara in the slightest. She is innocent about Mara's plan to escape the visit, to rid herself of obligation or conversation, but little does Mara know that her absence permits a door of blessing to open for me alone. Mara consumes herself in her work, with that platitude of incessant busy-ness. On her way out before anyone arrives, she shrugs and says, I have too much to do and I don't have the pleasures of time as you all do. But have a good time on your play date.

Ezra arrives in swim trunks, flip flops, and an orange fluorescent rash guard. My parents mention that Abel and his wife are happy to have him visit me, since their new son, Enoch, is just a few months born and Ezra could benefit from a more controlled change of pace. It was a perfect plan, they thought, and Ezra, the beautiful boy he is growing up to be, is indeed the unmistakable fascination my parents need. He has inquisitive eyes which were once, at birth, the color of mussel shells. Now, they are as ivy swirls nested between eyelids as translucent as the blossom of crab apple. His teeth are small bits of chalk, revealing his rosy cheeks brushed by hairy wisps of driftwood. He smiles at me and gives me a hug the instant he walks through my door.

Hi Tío Everardo, he says and I pinch his cheek. I'm glad to see you, I say.

My brother's wife has excellent alma maters and a fine career. They mortgaged a home almost two years after they were married, while they

were expecting Ezra. It was a stunning development, them being newly-wed, entering a new home, starting a family, cementing their place in the world. I never thought my brother would make it this far, let alone this far ahead of me. It was inconceivable to me, and to Mara especially, that this union of his was unfolding as rapidly as it was before our eyes, that the sails on the boat he was navigating were catching wind so gloriously. But I rationalized it as best as I could with the information I had: God hand-picked my brother's wife to counter *his* weaknesses; however, I didn't know anything about her, to make any determination as to why God hand-picked my brother for *her*. I only knew what Mara had said about her, having formed a so-called friendship with her out of her own insecurities, since this was Mara's way of domesticating the competition she felt was imminent to our family dynamics, in the margins of our respective marriages. That was how Mara coped with others: by playing them like a spinning top.

My brother's wife was astute and judicious, though, and sincere and confident, and she didn't seek to impress my parents with frivolous stunts nor did she exhibit dramas that sent red flags up in the air. She proceeded slowly, rather, securing the ground under her feet, content to lead without hurry, with watchful attempts. She wasn't aggressive and held her joy with an apparent temperance. This was a delightful melody to my parents, enough so that Mara realized it and brooded not-so-secretly about it—at least with me.

My parents were relieved God had delivered my brother's bride, that all his waiting had vindicated him, and that the claim he made (through the years of his singleness) that one day his beloved would walk through the doors of our church became prophetic before our eyes. She was, to my parents' assessment, a good wife, a good mom, and a good steward, and they openly shared it, this answered prayer, intent to testify it with few words, but enough that I couldn't help but proclaim it during my toast at their wedding.

7

Ezra set up his crayons and paper on my glass dining table that seated six. He drew circles and sticks that eventually morphed into heads and bodies.

This is my mommy, he said, and this is my Papi. This is my little brother. He pointed and drew chocolate lines over their heads and planted smiles in red and

dotted eyes in gray. My mother asked me, Do you remember that self-portrait you drew when you were little?

It was in second grade, I recalled, and it was on display for an open house. The bulletin board of art had been covered in a patchwork of dry tempera strokes, a medley of cubes and other shapes. When my mother arrived at my piece on the board, her eyes turned to shadows of themselves, like she was looking at something fractured and ludicrous, unfamiliar. She mustered a graceful smile in that moment of confusion.

This is me, I said to her.

But your hair is yellow here and your eyes are blue here, she said, looking at the portrait.

Yes, they are. That is me.

I pondered that time in the past as I looked at my mother now across the table, her attention moving from my silence to her grandson. And now, how did I perceive my mother? I ask myself this as I watch her summon a memory that continues to suppress her laughter, a mark of trepidation she's learned to practice well with me. Ezra plays colorfully with his stick family, adding colors here and there, shading in some blank spaces, leaving others vacuous and sterile. My mother stirs in her seat, looking around for my father whom we didn't notice had disappeared. I'll check the bathroom, she says. He isn't doing so well today.

My fingers are over my lips and my thumb is under my chin. In fourth grade, I had to write a biography assignment in Mrs. Hatfield's class, a biography of my mother. My mother returns from checking up on my father and asks Ezra new questions about what color is which.

Draw me a flower, she says. Draw me a sunshine. She squeezes his shoulders closer to her and he draws her some grass.

I hear myself reading the biography I wrote of my mother in fourth grade, reading it aloud, telling the class that my mother was a schoolteacher at a private Christian school, that she was teaching her kindergarten children how to write their ABCs, how to draw pictures and shapes, how she had baked brownies for her class on Valentine's Day, how she was their favorite teacher in the whole wide world and how she would let me go visit her after school to clean her chalkboard and to wipe the paint off the floor, how she grew up in a two-level home with a bedroom upstairs and a maid to cook for her whole family. Nobody,

I remembered, questioned my essay in class that day, and I got an A-plus on that paper for good penmanship and spelling.

That afternoon in my upstairs loft, Ezra and I carried on adventures, lived heroic lives, laid sieges and built forts near the fireplace in the living room downstairs. My parents didn't meddle, nor display any curiosity about our squealing or Ezra's shriek on his tumble down the stairs. They must have realized that they did not share our euphoria and that their participation would only shatter our imagined world with the voice of their impertinence, their pestilence, their intrusion at telling the commander of our squadron to quiet down.

We all went outside after lunch, after our food had settled, and walked the way through the neighboring apartment condos that lead to the pool. We walked the path through some shrubs and some grass and stopped immediately in front of the *Erythrina crista-galli*, admiring its radiant blooms, a coral showcase so enthralling that Ezra put his little right hand above his eyes to shade the sunlight away. The tree's deeply furrowed bark was a suit of armor that enchanted us and compelled Ezra to get close enough to touch. As we all drew our steps with him, a bee flew above us, and then another, and another. Old worker bees plucked at blossoms, and we followed them to what apparently was a hive soaring above us, a stalactite with perfect hexagons multiplied over sublime and transcendent layers. It was amazing to watch them hard at work, what looked like thousands of sterile females performing their natural tasks of cleaning the hive, watching over the larvae, the drones and the queen bee, building new wax combs, protecting the hive and milling around for pollen, nectar, and water. We saw the nuptial flight of a few drones, their eyes large and their bodies heavy with duty fulfilled, some fallen on the ground, rotting in the sun, unbridled by their queen. Ezra had no fear, but rather admired the magnificence of what he'd only seen in storybooks about bears and honey pots, trees and woods, and other conversational creatures.

The drones have no sting, I told him, and my parents, who looked pale with apprehension had already put their fingers over Ezra's shoulders. They loosened their grip a little, surrendering their guarded pulse, and we wandered away quietly, reverent and stunned.

8

It was a great solace to not see my brother Abel during Ezra's visit, to have the boy all to myself, to spend time with him devoid of his father's vigilant eye looming over my every move, an intrusion distinctly familiar as the trilling of a cricket. It was good like this, the calm of an afternoon with just my parents and Ezra. He was a vine of his mother and father, the fruit borne of two bodies of moral purity, of a heritage of the Lord. The bounty of Ezra's life is seen for its heroism, for the strength it possesses in this world, blessed with all that is good, all that is beautiful, all that can only be afforded when the virtuous marry. It was disgraceful for me to note that my body—designed for endurance and for joy, designed in the image of God—had been made miserable by my imposed myopia. I stood in line waiting to collect a debt owed to me from those whose lives I made but waste with my verdicts and my judgments. What profit did I gain laboring for the wind? O, how much God sees of me, with two big eyes that weep at the sight of my thoughts, a cause for Him to harden His heart at my petty offerings, my filthy rags, my second-rate sacrifices.

At the pool, Ezra launches himself with boldness, but only attempts the deep end if my hands catch him. My parents sit under a spider that is weaving a tangled sheet of silk on the eaves of a white arbor, and they watch their grandson splash, their smiles agape with pleasure, nodding as he dog paddles.

Mírame, he shouts to them. I am not touching the floor, look!

They reply with applause. Bravo, they say, you are a good swimmer.

Ezra is intrepid, reaching for the edge of the pool on his own after leaving my side, his wet head like a dark orb, a buoy bobbing over blue water brilliance. Ezra arrives at the steps in the shallow end and sits there triumphantly while I stagger on the other side, frozen in the six foot level of the pool, waiting for water to move under my face. My reflection is over the surface, a distorted face looking back at me. The water moves suddenly and I plunge down to the bottom. It is enough, enough to bear the sting of a bee without making a fuss because after all, I am the one who owes a debt for having buried my brother.