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Bee Work | Departure

Anne Simpson

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Bee Work

(an essay)

&

Departure

(a poem)

by

Anne Simpson



We once had a single beehive on our land, on the little ridge above our garden, painted yellow. It looked like a filing cabinet: cheerful, askew. When I returned home from working in Saskatchewan, I checked on the hive. It was quiet in the garden: a calm, sunny evening in June. I took off the outer cover of the hive, and that familiar aroma wafted up, but there were no bees, just ants moving around the frames. It was like some conjuring trick gone wrong. They were not there. They were not coming back.

Over the nine-month period that I lived in the prairies, I'd become better acquainted with bees. The woman in whose house I lived in Saskatoon was an avid beekeeper: Roberta worked with Barry, a retired professor, who kept hundreds of hives – about eight hundred in all – in yards outside Langham, northwest of Saskatoon. I'd gone out with them in the late winter and early spring; they'd lost between fifteen and twenty percent of their hives, which wasn't as bad as the year before, but was, nevertheless, a tremendous loss.

Afterwards, I wrote a series of poems in *Quick*. I wasn't sure why I chose to write a sequence in which one page is designated for a worker bee, and the facing page is designated for a woman; I only knew it seemed right. Now I see that the layout let me put one thing beside another to show the pull between them: that shimmer of yearning, of desire. The deeper I went with the writing, the more mysterious the bee became, and the more unfamiliar the woman. It is, no doubt, a simplification to divide these worlds. But something comes of it, if only that the human recedes in dominance.

So how do we get closer to the nature of the bee's experience, mystery that it is? The biologist Jakob von Uexküll examined animal environments in a way that was

unusual for the time. I looked up his book at the library. First published in 1934, it has a fabulously unscientific title: *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds*.ⁱ His inquiry concerns the way in which the world appears to an animal. It was Uexküll's idea that each creature, whether tick, jellyfish, or jackdaw (or crow), inhabits its own *Umwelt*, its own self-world or phenomenal world, which made up an infinite diversity of perceptual worlds, each like a soap bubble. These soap bubbles Uexküll saw as closed environments, though they were all equally perfect and linked together. The tick's *Umwelt* is radically different from the jackdaw's *Umwelt*. He points out that a field filled with wildflowers would appear to a honeybee as a field of circles and star-like shapes: of these, the circles, or closed buds, would be less inviting than the star-like shapes of the open blossoms.

The larger idea that Uexküll passed down is that of the difference, for each creature, in the perception of time and space: his greatest contribution to biology might be that he could envision it not only in terms of temporality and spatiality, but further—in terms of its meaning for its subject. What I love best about Uexküll's book are the diagrams of how a bee sees a field, how a sea urchin navigates the ocean, how a dog and a blind man negotiate a street in a town. The homely, somehow childlike, drawings are worth the read. Yet Uexküll also maintains that every creature's *Umwelt* is independent from another's: the spider, whose web is precisely formed to catch the fly, is separate from the world of the fly.

Yet we are linked. Alexandra Horowitz considers this in her book, *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell and Know*, mentioning the implications of Uexküll's work. David

Abram talks about his magical experience with a raven in *Becoming Animal*. And Jon Young's study of birds in *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World*, takes up where Uexküll leaves off. His close study of the way birds behave shows how much is on offer to us if we pay attention, but he points out the difference between "collision" and "connection." It's possible for us read the signs of the wild, Young says, mentioning the experience of a San Bushman, who observes: "If I see it [a small bird], but don't *recognize* it, there is no thin thread...Every time I see and recognize the bird, the thread strengthens. Eventually it will grow into a string, then a cord, and finally a rope".ⁱⁱ The San Bushman suggests that we can make such ropes with all of nature, if we follow this practice.

To see the same bird, over and over, and to strengthen the thread, is demanding both in terms of time and place. It implies return – a "showing-up" – on the part of the one who wants to strengthen the thread. I have a friend who is a Trappist nun, and she tells me that along with her regular vows, she made a fourth vow, one of stability. When I asked what that meant, exactly, she said that it meant a vow to the abbey where she lives, the land on which it is situated. She does not leave it, unless she must: she can, for instance, go to appointments with the dentist or doctor, but her outings are rare. She takes photographs constantly; she has seen a heron come and go over the seasons, a sandhill crane blown off its usual migration path, a cedar waxwing stranded at her window as winter was coming on. Like the San Bushman, her photographs offer ropes to all other things across the monastic enclosure and beyond it. In this way, she approaches the otherness of creatures.

There is, always, the danger of anthropomorphizing what we see when we imagine this otherness, but it's a risk worth taking. I'd like to be able to see the world anew, to be able to imagine time and space as if from the point of view of a tick or a jellyfish (all right, maybe it's going too far to want to understand tick-ness). This is the liberation of imagination, that we can be freed from our own being into the openness of another. None of us will get it right. The *as if* is what's important, or what Jan Zwicky, referring to Wittgenstein, calls "seeing-as."

And this seeing-as could take many forms. I could go much further in terms of how I imagine myself as bee, how the bee imagines the world of the human. I could play around more with what it is to see as a bee sees. I could consider how different time is for a bee. I could think in a much deeper way about how the bee communicates the flight path to a nearby patch of clover. The seeing-as of poetry, the work of envisioning, allows us to move towards being-as-if-I-were-other. But I must always come back to my own world, my own *Umwelt*. I can go only so far imagining the world of a bee and then I must relinquish it.

Yet it is necessary to try to penetrate this mystery, says the writer J. M. Coetzee in the Tanner Lectures given at Princeton University. In the first lecture, he offers a fictional character, herself a novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who gives a talk at Appleton College about the abuse of animals. She points out that there is no excuse for the lack of sympathy shown by humans toward other animals, because "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination." Costello goes on to say that most human beings do not

stretch the bounds of our imaginations with regard to animals, because we “can do anything [with regard to animals] and get away with it.”ⁱⁱⁱ We do not stretch the bounds of our imagination, and therefore, we are able to kill.

For a long time, I bought into what my culture taught me. Ideas belonged in the realm of the human, and language allowed those ideas to be exchanged. How and when did it begin to change? Maybe it had something to do with teaching literature in rural Nigeria, where I was tasked with teaching *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Great Gatsby* without having copies for the students. At some point after I returned to Canada, I attended a philosophy seminar at Queen’s University in which we were discussing Mikhail Bakhtin’s thought together with William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. This wasn’t a seminar for credit; it was an open seminar held merely for the sake of those who wanted to learn about Bakhtin and Faulkner.

What I recall most vividly is a discussion in which we talked about Benjy, the character in *The Sound and the Fury* whose disabilities do not allow him to speak. I argued that the bits of lyric language collaged together make up Benjy’s world, and that the fact he is not able to convey precisely what he knows does not prove he lacks intelligence. Who were we to say so? I was dismayed by the fact that the others felt that intelligence was predicated by language, and I continued to think about this for years—the arrogance of those who speak, as if what cannot speak, including the non-human, is less worthy. As recent philosophers have suggested, language alone is not an indicator

of sentience: it is entirely possible that thinking and speaking goes on where we cannot sense it, where we have no entry.

We might not know, but, instead, intuit the swerves of starlings as they move and shift and apparently think as one, or the swift, waggle-tailed leap of a deer from field into woods, or the staccato *thwap, thwap, thwap* of a beaver's tail on water when it is being pursued by a dog. And yet it is also true that through expressive gestures, we do have perceptions about what people and creatures are telling us. I once came across a fox in the yard as I was washing the car. It seemed entranced with the water coming out of the hose, and didn't go away. It crouched, watching. I turned down the water and gave it a spray, and it danced like a five-year-old, as if it were enjoying running through the sprinkler. It was playing with me; it played with my daughter. It came back many times that summer, and then it didn't come. We didn't know what had become of it; we missed it, that russet-coloured creature with the black socks that simply wanted to fool around. I doubted I'd have been able to convey our mutual sense of play if I tried to put it in words. The way we "conversed" was outside language, yet some exchange took place between us, even if it was more slapstick than anything else. All of us have had similar encounters at one time or another.

This was a case when language wasn't necessary. There are times when language departs from us: to be prevented from speaking can be a kind of agony. A friend told me what it was like for her when she was speaking in public and had to stop because she couldn't make sense of what she was reading. No one knew what had happened. She fled, and found herself in a room with magazines, which she picked up in a panic,

wondering if she could still read. She ran outside, crying out the names of things she'd always known. "Graaaaaaaaaaaaaass," she tried, but it sounded strange to her ears. She was experiencing a TIA, or a transient ischemic attack. She was back to normal within minutes, but the experience of being on the outside of language was terrifying. This un-languaged world is frightening when we can't make ourselves understood, when something has gone awry with the body upon which we rely.

There are times, too, when language is just not sufficient, when it can't come close. I've learned that on the many occasions when the bees didn't make it through the winter it probably had to do with the fact that corn is grown in the fields not far from where we live. Across the road and up the slope, there's a field of corn, and another one higher up the slope. We know, now, that neonicotinoid pesticides coat the corn seeds, that when they're planted with air seeders, pesticide dust is blown into the air. Since the prevailing winds blow in our direction, down the slope, into the woods around our house and across the estuary, it is no wonder the bees didn't have a fighting chance. Their world was too porous. They were too exposed. And I was at a loss that June evening, standing on the hill above the garden, after taking off the hive cover and finding no bees—not one. The combs were darkened, and ants scribbled their way across them. It was like standing over a devastated city, breathing in the most beguiling fragrance, which was, in fact, the honeyed scent of death. There was nothing to be said.

We don't keep hives on our land now. Sometimes I think of how the hive looked when the bees were coming and going in the light, how alive the air, how it seemed to be humming, radiant with bees. There is so much to mourn in the Anthropocene that we could grow numb. We could close our eyes, stop our ears, become mute. Why sing, if only to lament? No wonder that the language of grief is nearly inarticulate, consisting of little more than moans. We confront the unsayable; we come up against all that is impossible to say. So writers, with a luxury of words at their disposal, are sometimes stricken by poverty.

It could be that what Rainer Maria Rilke says in the "Eighth Elegy" of the *Duino Elegies* is true: we can't see "the Open, which is so / deep in animal's faces".^{iv} We are bound by time. I might look at the face of the bass, caught on my brother-in-law's hook as it slaps its body back and forth. I might delight in the face of a dog, just after it has rolled in the snow. I might examine a bee, close up, as its tongue explores the inside of a flower. But my seeing involves a "No," Rilke would say. I am already anticipating death. His notion of the Open suggests that unconsciousness allows creatures access to a realm that is infinite in its spaciousness, one that humans can't access.

I could say that lingering Cartesian duality exists in Rilke's thinking, that it reinforces the human and non-human divide, though he stresses that humans, especially adults, are limited, while animals are the richer for facing into this unlimited realm. And I could go on to say that long before the *Duino Elegies* were published, there were those who were looking at the question of whether animals might be conscious. Charles Darwin pointed out in *Origin of Species* that careful observation would lead

naturalists to attribute the habits of animals to reason more readily than to mere instinct. William James's *Principles of Psychology* advanced the notion of consciousness, in varying degrees, among animals. I could point out that the study of animal consciousness developed as the twentieth century progressed, and that, in practical terms, advocates worked towards improving conditions for animals, helping to bring forward such legislation as animal welfare acts. At the same time, the philosophical question of animal consciousness continued to be actively debated. In 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagle published an article, "What is it like to be a bat?"—in which there is no mention of Uexküll. (Interestingly, Coetzee's character, Elizabeth Costello, excoriates Nagle for his lack of imaginative powers, since he admits he cannot entertain what it might be like to be a bat.) And quite recently, in 2012, the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness was proclaimed at the Francis Crick Memorial Conference on Consciousness in Human and non-Human Animals.

I could point out these developments in order to emphasize how curiously Rilke conceives of the difference between humans and animals: that consciousness is not necessarily to be seen as a good. But it is not that Rilke forfeits otherness; it is that he approaches otherness in an imaginative way. What the philosopher Nagle refuses to do, Rilke attempts. Animals do not think as humans think, Rilke suggests. We are the ones who are twisted around by what we know. It is as if Rilke offers an entirely different way of thinking as a possibility, which is what imagination can do. It shows us another threshold, another pathway.

Maybe this is why Jakob von Uexküll's contribution is so intriguing, as he inquires into the ways creatures are tuned to their environments, and, indeed, the way their environments are tuned to them. His investigation is a refusal of any mechanistic explanation for biology, as he points out early on in his book. Instead, he asks about the particular, intimate, and subjective worlds of creatures. How do they perceive? What signs do they look for? The tick's world might encroach upon the human when it receives cues (in the form of warmth and sweat). And so it hops a ride. Even when it comes to the tick, Uexküll is curious about what offers it significance. He investigates such things in a beguiling way: "...we must blow, in fancy, a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions it alone knows."^v There is something lovely in this idea, as if he were saying to his reader: "The tick is just as lively and interesting as you." In other words, he has to imagine his way into each creature's environment to reveal how its world is replete with meanings. In this he was prescient. He wanted to know; he cared to know.

And this brings me back to the way imagination enriches and deepens observation. The richly evocative "Six Bee Poems" by Jo Shapcott bring together the worlds of human and bee in a way that reminds me of Uexküll. (As I consider this, I have the writings of Uexküll and Shapcott side by side, as if they were speaking to each other.) Each of Shapcott's short poems forms part of a hexagon, a six-sided story of transformation. At first the speaker in these poems merely regards her subject; the bees have been thrust upon her by her partner, who leaves her a manual on the care of bees. She warns the bees that she will be looking after them, that their fate is in her hands.

Ultimately, she becomes her own hive; bees enter and exit through her ears and eyes. In the fifth poem (“CCD”), though, her body is devastated by the collapse of the hive, entirely emptied. This is followed by a postscript of loneliness, the barren nothing of a life without bees (“Stinger”). The story circles around to where it began, with the woman foretelling the fate of the bees, in some ways foretelling her own fate.^{vi}

Shapcott’s narrator *becomes* the beehive she cares to know about, and so she enters the impossible possible, that shamanic space that poetry creates. Maybe Rilke is not so far off the mark when he points out that we might glimpse what animals do, before things revert back to what he calls “World.” All we hope for is that glimpse, a momentary bridge. Shapcott takes us to that place: she lets us be bee. Her work as a writer is to try to make a flimsy bridge of wing gauze, of bee hum, of wax. For an instant, we carry a hive inside our own skin, we hear the bees in our blood.

In writing, we work at the border of the sayable and the unsayable. Poetry, fiction—these are stabs in the dark. Despite that, we attempt to make a space for the intimate, by suggesting a nearness to what we examine closely. This is not sentimentality. This is an unflinching attempt to get close. At the same time, we make a space for what is beyond us to convey, though somehow it is part of the leap of imagining: the yearning to understand. It is what we all do, writers or not. I care enough to ask what it’s like for you, getting over cancer, or you care enough to ask about the death of my father. If this is what we do as human beings, this is what we can also do, or try to do, with those who can’t tell us—the world of the non-human. This is the reach of

imagination, so that even if it fails, and it *will* fail, it makes the attempt to see into otherness.

Departure

We leave as one clustered hum, jostle
of passengers. Think of us
departing through frosted doors
into a life that lies beyond, that frisson of what can't be
seen—
what's next. Here we pause, together, all alert
for the next instruction. Waiting,
we drift between the tines
of a cherry's branches. Tuning it
clear, sweet, once. Slipped, the slung warmth of each other,
uncertainty's buzz, poised, massed
into quiver. Chitchat of one body against another,
laddering under,
over, under, over. This is how we speak.
This is how we cling, unhived, undone: the was, the went. Unkiltered,
shuddered into the future. We dream
a many-chambered edifice of wax, honey-fragrant, rich
with our queen's proliferations, a babbled
brood, thousands a day. She is us—
Or she was. So we come to it, what we can't deny: the whole thing's impossible.
Sharp tanged bark, blossoms fistled tight, lashes
of rain to come. A few hours, that's all.

ⁱ Jakob von Uexküll, *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds*, in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Clair H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957) pp. 5-80.

ⁱⁱ Molly Bergen, "In Botswana, Merging Tradition and Technology," *Conservation International*, Oct. 6, 2009 (online edition) in Jon Young, *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World* (New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) p. xxv.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, first delivered as two lectures in the Tanner Lectures on Human Values in October, 1997, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

^{iv} Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Eighth Elegy," *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, Random House) p. 193.

^v Uexküll, *ibid*, 5.

^{vi} Jo Shapcott, "Six Bee Poems" in *Poetry Review* (London: The Poetry Society) Vol. 101:1, Spring 2011.

ANNE SIMPSON is a Canadian writer of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, Anne has published seven books, of which four have been included in the *Globe and Mail's* 100 Best Books of the Year. She is the author of four books of poetry: *Is* (2011); *Quick* (2007), winner of the Pat Lowther Memorial Award; *Loop* (2003), winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize; and *Light Falls Through You* (2000), winner of the Gerald Lampert Memorial Prize and the Atlantic Poetry Prize. She has also written two novels, *Falling* (2008), longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and winner of the Dartmouth Award for Fiction, and *Canterbury Beach* (2001). Her book of essays, *The Marram Grass: Poetry and Otherness* (2009), delves into issues of poetry, art, and empathy. After studying at Queen's University and the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University), she lived in France, where she worked in a L'Arche residence, and in Italy, where she studied art. For two years, she lived in Nigeria, where she volunteered as an English teacher with CUSO. She continued her work in adult literacy in Kingston, Ontario, founding a program for adults through a school board. Now she lives in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where she started the Writing Centre at StFX University. She has been a writer-in-residence at libraries and universities across Canada. Recently, she was invited to do a short residency with the OSU Children's Libraries in Ghana, West Africa.

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