



# ARISTAEUS

## MIRIAM BERNE

*Prose Contest - Second Place*

*(Inspired by Sisyphus, by Anis Mojgani)*

In February it was too cold for bees but they showed up anyway.

*My dad stepped on a hole in the ground and was stung 5 times in the leg*

*The bees filled the room of feathers and the chapters written by them*

*Nikos saw them drown in honey*

*Tyler stands in a field of suns watching them fearlessly*

*They take over my mom's summer flower box beneath our window seat*

I peered over the drain where the charm fell through. I'd managed to catch the others that hung on the same chain. I felt the hum before I heard it. I braced myself against the sink and watched the bees fly out of the opening where the green had disappeared. That was the first week they followed me. I took them wherever I went: they clogged the drain while I showered, flew up through my straw during lunch, carried me on my bed while I slept. I don't pay them much mind anymore. The buzz I don't hear until he walks past and suddenly the vibrations make it too hard to stand. I always thought dreams were meant to be followed but for weeks I slept in darkness and my compass pointed down.

Sylvia Plath took up beekeeping in June. She did not make it through the winter.

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I knew it was going to end that Tuesday at practice. I hadn't seen you in a few days and you weren't making any effort to speak to me unless I spoke first. It's four months later but it would have been 365 days. I found your sweaters in the back of my closet. That is all.

I have nothing left of you, just the clothes you once wore and the photos we once took. For months your name was stuck in my throat and only now is the blue leaving my face.

•

Sometimes the bees just watch me and I don't even notice them. I know they're there though, and I know that they check in on you, too, but you don't know what their sting feels like.

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I called on Thursday after not seeing him for a week. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to listen, either. He went every Monday and Friday to play and she was there. It felt like he knew exactly what had happened and why he was leaving but he didn't—wouldn't—tell me. But it's hard to breathe through someone else's tears.

February was cold and so was March and April but I put my winter coat in the attic today. I didn't have time to write you a letter.

•

When Pharaoh forced young Moses to decide between gems and coal, he chose to speak with a certain unsteadiness. When my tongue was swollen from the bee stings, I chose to speak with written words.

It is believed by some that a swarm of bees was to be avoided because while the swarm was on the move, they were carrying messages and doing the biddings of the gods. As I cried my tears turned to bees, delivering messages to the pages. Sometimes I beg them to stop because I can't see myself in the mirror anymore, "please bees, not now. please, stop" and the trails on my face turn to honey.

His sweaters, I don't know if they fit me as well anymore. I don't know if it's due to the cold it lets in or his memory, or maybe something inside of me, that my body can't regulate warmth as bumps rise from my arms.

•

Did you ever care Chris? Which planet did you land on? I keep receiving letters from the bees, messengers between worlds, but it's in a code I can't understand.

•

I let the bees follow me wherever they want, now. I didn't ever really have that choice but I'm okay with it now, with seeing them always.

They went with me from my house to his house, then the moments we shared, to the memories we will always have, and then back to my house where he doesn't visit anymore. I let the rest of them fly back to the water and the sand and the lagoon where we first sat, watched them fly away. Their hums made a vibration of pain and love mixed together that I felt in my bones. The following day, as I left the floor of my room, the sky made the same sound.

As I lie trembling, naked on my floor, the cold seeped in and the sweaters stared at me unable to help.

•

Aristaeus was the god of the bees. He chased Eurydice when she was bitten by a serpent and died. Her nymph sisters punished him. His bees began to sicken and die. To the fountain Arethusa he went, where he was advised to establish altars, sacrifice the cows, and leave their dead carcasses. From them came new swarms of bees. Hades was the god of the Underworld, to which the bees bridge to the natural world, like the River Styx.

I think of the bees I let fly away by the lagoon with the ducks. How the air blows them back towards me. They keep speaking to me, but I can't understand. Stand tall and steady. Bones shaking with their buzzes. The pentagons hold the sweetness they give us for free, rub into my skin let whatever wishes stick to me because not much else will.

Did my love just not count as high as you could? Thirty-four weeks left your head so quickly it was as if it never happened. What a beautiful dream. When you drove away from my house, you stole a year of my life with you. What a beautiful dream. A beautiful murder of a dream, taking a part of me that I didn't have time to reach myself. I used to try to stretch towards it but I tore muscles reaching that far. I keep walking.

•

Once, bees kept our flowers alive and which kept springs alive. And now they follow me. So I keep on listening. Just in case their language begins to make sense in my head.

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It was said that when Hades took her, while she leaned down to pluck a flower, he rose from the Underworld, grabbed her and left the world up above. Demeter threatened to take fertility from the earth, and thus an agreement was born; the seasons changed. Winter fills the void of Persephone.

Death must occur in order for life to begin again because poor Persephone was fooled into a false love that shielded her from the flowers and trees that wanted to bloom but had to wait.

I wonder if the bees that rose from the carcasses are the same that follow me. If that which was a second chance was passed on to Aristaeus wrongfully.

•

I went back to the lagoon where we once sat. A new touch dowsed my hand in alcohol, cleansed me of the words and love I once bathed in. I am not where I am now that I was with you. I am not stuck in February, and the dark winter whipping around my hair and thoughts is now warm May. But some days that winter returns. I unravel a sweater and knit it back together. I let the cold melt. Come May again, I fold it gently into the back of my closet, visiting the bees who hide while I close my eyes, soaking my skin with warm honey.

