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# The River Honey Queen Bess

Cynthia Macdonald

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The River Honey Queen Bess ·  
*Cynthia Macdonald*

I

In May it drops down fresh from the mountains,  
Dashing silver flakes of water like mica in the air.  
Such abundance foils the stones' and hearts' resistance.  
    The five dare not broach their wish to dance with water.  
    This is the season of their odes.

Early July and not much rain. The pulse slows. Rocks still  
Force froth, but the rush is spent. Puckering white  
At the selvedge, its weave of blue and green unfurls.  
    Three men, two women are rapt in it.  
    This is the season of their proposals.

August, and what has always been at the bottom is seen:  
Tires, shoes; water moccasins, coral snakes  
Braiding in the mud; and what is culturing in  
The mirror plates now glazed false blue?  
    “A pox on rivers; we always knew,” they say.  
    This is the season of their attempted escapes.

After the swellings and fevers abate  
The suitors drape themselves in velvet blue and green  
To conceal August scars, and order spring-bottled water,  
Hoping glass will contain the uncontrollable.  
Before they can begin to drink, a swarm escapes —  
Gold-dazzle, noise, honey, sting — a circle  
Around each head, a crown of May bees.

Truth has been concealed, like 15th-century meat  
 Rotting under its fabric of spices. Seasons  
 Have their progression and this is misleading:  
 The fool's-gold suitors believe if May had lasted  
 They would have found their beloved. Four leave,  
 Mourning the march of months, the thwarting procession.  
 But Will stays, through winter's seeming stasis  
 When blood becomes manageable, to have the Honey Queen again.

This year, no one knows why — a record snowfall? the drift of  
 Lava ash over the sun? fatigue, sheer as  
 The cliff beside the river? — June does not begin  
 On its appointed date. He has not only the month  
 But its extension to try to pull the river's winding sheet  
 Through his gold ring, the wedding band which  
 Plays *The Water Music*. But though he cannot handle  
 The river which refuses to be treated like  
 A scarf, he finds he knows her.

August discoveries are not the fault of August. Under  
 The river's cloak, under the course of its blue blood  
 Is a slut, a gutter of water and men. The thirst of love  
 Is slaked by cloacal knowledge. What should Will do?  
 Cross himself or the river? What can he afford?

He goes to Raleigh to buy the river valley, to build  
 The Mother Goose Enchanted Village. No more brooding.  
 Between "The Queen is in the parlor eating bread and  
 Honey Golden Manse" and "The Jack fell down  
 And broke his crown Hill," the water wends. Will has it  
 Paved with silver glass, assuring safe reflection; he bends  
 To face himself. Through flowered banks the mirrored river curves;  
 Underneath, Honey Queen Bess sings her sting green music.