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Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them

for Marian Dobbin

Poetry can usefully be considered as a negotiation in words between no-mind and mind, between that place where attention is at rest in the void, open to inspiration from elsewhere, and that human place in conscious, directed attention where the rigour of craft finds its natural home.

Here, then, are nine short meditations on poetry — on the obsessive, on craft and inspiration, on the apparently wayward but always mysteriously purposeful flight of bees in my bonnet.

1

The first time I hear the expression ‘You have a bee in your bonnet’ I’m in Miss Shannon’s fifth class in primary school, The Central Model Girl’s School, Gardiner Street. I’m in trouble. Again. Usually I’m in trouble for something I’ve said. This time it’s for something I’ve written. A poem, when I’d been told specifically to write a composition about Milk.

I’m in deep mourning at the time for my dog Prince. Prince got run over by a bus the week before. I wrote an elegy. I didn’t have that word then. *Elegy*. Poor dog. Poor dead dog. Miss Shannon thought I was up to something.

“If I wanted a poem, I’d have asked for a poem.”

“But ...”

“But nothing. I’ll hear no excuses. And I’ll have those three pages.”

Compositions are often done last thing on Sunday night in bed but I have Prince’s ghost under my side of the bed and I haven’t got an essay — so a poem ... who would not love a poem? Miss Shannon would surely love a poem, a poem about Prince. A true Prince, a noble hound.

“You’ve a bee in your bonnet about these compositions. You’ll hand three pages up first thing in the morning.”

I knew what a bonnet was. *Little Women. What Katy Did. What Katy Did Next, Good Wives.* Or our drunken neighbour singing. A party piece. At Easter.

In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it...

Google calls up Irvine Berlin's lyrics in the blink of an eye now as I write at my desk in the Shomera, a wooden workroom/studio in the back garden. Dusk, winter. The last crop of borage still a blue, blue intensity in the fading light. Borage: also known as starflower, bee balm, bee bush, beloved of bees, its oil used to regulate and calm the female endocrine system. According to Pliny, borage was the famous Nepenthe of Homer which when drunk steeped in wine brought absolute forgetfulness. Bacon says that 'it hath an excellent spirit to repress the fuliginous vapour of dusky melancholie.'

All I know for sure is that the bees, the real bees, bumble bees and honey bees alike, absolutely adore it — and their buzz has been my undersong all year long though now with the onset of winter there are fewer and fewer bees making to the fewer and fewer blossoms. Bees, when they discover a new crop coming into flower return to the hive and dance intricate signals with coded information in their dancing about these promising sources of food — nectar and pollen. They dance out the exact distance of the food source from the hive and its angle to the sun — for the other bees to fix a bead on.

So, back there in the classroom: elegy. I know Miss Shannon's response is not really about the poem or the unwritten composition or my big mouth. I know that now; I know we're all sad in that room of our childhood for our classmate, Clare, is dead of diphtheria and the public health people have been all over us with tests and needles. Diphtheria! A new word full of menace. The terrible unwanted thought that is buzzing about my brain: I wish it was X who'd died. X who follows me about the place looking to persecute me. Who pinches me from behind. Who laughs at my home made clothes. Who got everyone jeering my cut-down coat with the darts for the breasts I didn't yet have.

I would meet X's daughter, twenty years later, while teaching a writing class to the women in Mountjoy Gaol.

Gentle Clare, with her raven black hair and her blue, blue eyes, as blue as the borage I grow in memory of all my lost ones, my bees in my bonnet. The empty space where she once sat beside me.

2

The American poet, Marianne Moore, is of Irish extraction: her great great grandfather ran away to sea from Merrion Square — at least this is the story that came down in the family and that she liked to put about. One of her most famous poems constitutes a flamboyant, some would say drastic, exercise in revision. An

ars poetica — irreverent, charming, ludic, prematurely post modern, first published in 1924.

Here's how it opens:

Poetry

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are
useful...

And here's how it finishes:

...however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the
result is not poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be

"literalists of

the imagination" — above

insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"
shall we have

it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, you are interested in poetry.

The full poem is about twice as long as the excerpts you've just heard. Now here's
her revision, published in *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* in 1967:

Poetry

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

That's it in its entirety. Three lines.

The phrase "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" was held out to me as a student by more than one teacher, to encourage the validation and valuation of images — striking images, quirky images, clear images, mirror images.

Behind it all was the dead hand of Ezra Pound: By the time I began to seriously set myself the task of learning the honest trade of poetry, the precepts of the *Imagist Manifesto*, published in 1916, were deeply embedded in poetry culture, I heard the phrase "show me, don't tell me" so often I *had* to distrust it — why, after all, should an abstract noun be an abomination? What about the music? The tune of the poem? The dance of the poem?

While I could see the use of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" as a strategy for building a poem full of the quiddity of the world, the thinginess of creation, I was suspicious of any definite statements about Poetry with a capital P; as wary as I was about grand statements about Politics with a capital P. As soon as a rule or a tendency was proposed, my inner transgressor would, invariably, pipe up.

Marianne Moore has a lovely response to a questionnaire in *Harpers Bazaar* (November of 1964 nearly fifty years ago now) which turns the "imaginary gardens with real toads in them", precept neatly on its head.

The question was: "What other pets ... have you? Was there a crow there? Haven't I read that you have a crow?"

Moore answered: "... when *Harper's Bazaar* asked me for a fantasy I thought I might have (a crow) adopt me, sleep in the Park or wherever it goes at night, come to see me, wait on me if I wanted my pocket dictionary or an eraser or handkerchief. I wrote that piece, had the crow go to market with me, to the drugstore"

So completely does she make the crow come alive that a neighbor sharing the elevator in the apartment block in Greenwich Village wanted to know "... *where* is that crow of yours."

She gives us her imaginary New York with the real crow in it, obversely written as the real New York with the imaginary crow in it.

Gardens and toads, cities and crows. Bonnets and bees.

Sister Philippa says I have a bee in my bonnet. I am in her office and I am in deep trouble. The official reason for my impending expulsion from Saint Michael's Holy Faith Secondary School in Finglas is that, with my friend Mary Leader, I have organized a protest march against ... well? What? Nuns? The class system? The state of the world? The war with the nuns and their henchgirls had been ongoing since my first day in the place.

"Hands up, who says the family rosary", Sister Christopher, another nun, that first day. And I didn't put my hand up. We didn't do the rosary at home. She had the rest of the class down on their knees to say a prayer for me and my family. That drew snorts of laughter when I reported it at home; it also taught me the danger of truth telling.

It was all downhill from there. In any case, the interesting stuff was happening outside the school and if I wasn't writing poems I was writing songs and my masters were the young Sandy Denny, Richard Thomson, Joni Mitchell, John Mayall, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Van our own Man. I'd already been threatened with expulsion when my notebook was confiscated and they found "vile filth" in it. Said "vile filth" being my innocent hormone-driven daydreams featuring swords and beasts and wolves, beings of light and creatures of darkness; "imaginary other dimensions with real teenagers in them". With friends like John Borrowman of the curly locks and scarlet-lined cloak, lending me the poems of Rimbaud and his own song lyrics, the first poet of my own generation that I met. ("Dracula himself" as my father called him)

Being thrown out of school was the best thing that could have happened to me.

Not that the frightened child who stood before Sister Phillipa thought so. Not after the ritual humiliation of being brought into every single classroom and made apologize for bringing the whole school into disrepute.

Sister Phillipa, back in her office, informed me that I had a bee in my bonnet. I felt my mouth opening. There would be no coming back from it, once said. My abject, groveling, sniveling self that had been frogmarched through the school, that could have, by just a small increase in contrition, redeemed herself, could have even had an outside chance of avoiding the expulsion, was once again subverted by the inner transgressor who shook off her abjection, shook off her sniveling and said:

"Better bees in my bonnet than bats in my belfry".

Amazing myself. Sealing my fate.

I was sent to my grandparents' house in Marino to escape the bad influences of Finglas. And there in my grandfather's cabinet I found an old friend, a companion to my woes. Emily Dickinson. The Modern Library Edition, with an introduction by Conrad Aiken. *The Selected Poems*. It had always been in the cabinet and it had scribbles of mine or one of the cousins from when we were toddlers. It suited my

dark adolescent moods perfectly. I'm fifteen when I reclaim the book, 1970, 10 years since first I saw it.

I have it still. Miraculously, I've kept hold of it through all the confusions and vicissitudes of a rambling youth. And this is what my teenage self underlined back then :

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room...

Mary Leader, my best pal in the convent, was expelled with me. Beautiful girl, a painter and musician. Dead at sixteen. Sister Phillipa, at the funeral couldn't look me in the eye. John Borrowman, dead at forty six in Copenhagen.

Who knows where the time goes:

Across the evening sky all the birds are leaving

But how can they know it's time for them to go?

Before the winter fire, I will still be dreaming

I have no thought of time...

I sang it through, sang it to the empty sky, and I added my own lines:

"Imaginary skies with real migrant birds in them".

"Imaginary pasts with real dead friends in them".

4

There is a body of Brehon Law in relation to bees, the *Bechbretha*. *Bechbretha* is translated into English as *Bee Judgements*, composed in the seventh century. The laws remind us we had ancestors who knew the need to articulate, to be precise in language, in order to be fair to the bees and to the humans who had need of them. The laws remind us now how crucial, how valuable was the honey and wax, precious commodities, all sweetness and light, the marvellous gifts of the bees to our ancestors, and to us.

When I read the *Bechbretha*, I feel I am connecting directly to the aboriginal mind of the ancestors. The ancestors who understood both human community and

what I will call, and relish calling, 'bee mind'. How many generations of observing and understanding human nature, and bee nature, did it take for the following to enter consciousness, be assimilated and then expressed:

“The man from whom bees escape and who ventures testimony that the swarm enters the land of his neighbour at swarming times: they divide in half between them the produce of that swarm, [i.e.] all produce for three years; but the source of their procreation (i.e. the bees themselves) belongs to the holding in which it (the swarm) settles.”

Or this:

“The man who finds a stray swarm of bees on a lawful green [the extent of a lawful green in Irish law is as far as the sound of a bell carries, or the crowing of a cock reaches]: it gives a claim to one quarter of its produce for a year to the man who finds it: the other three quarters [go] to the [owner of] the green where it is found.”

And this lovely compassionate judgement which gives immunity to the bees in the event they attack:

“Among the complete immunities in bee-judgements according to Irish law is the man on whom they have rushed when robbing them, moving them, seizing them [or] looking at them over their hives at the time they are swarming.”

These ancestral Irish black bees are buzzing about my bonnet for sure. Especially given that their contemporary descendants are in such danger from the institutionalized mind of the corporations.

Neonicotinoid pesticides, in my view, should properly be termed biocides. Neonicotinoids are manufactured and peddled by corporations that are so powerful they can override the sovereignty of states. My own science is often wonky but I know my genetically modified onions and my real bees. The Minister for Agriculture of the Republic where I am a citizen recently abstained on a vote in Europe that sought to impose a two year moratorium on the use of neonicotinoids. Limited as it was, this was “imaginative legislation, perhaps with real breath in it”. And our Minister sat on his hands.

Once, in a cave near Tarbes in the South West of France, I put my hand in the outline of an ancestor's hand. It is believed to be a woman's hand as, indeed, are many of the hand stencils made by Paleolithic peoples across the world. The print I'm referring to was made by taking red ochre, possibly in the mouth or a tube, and spraying it around the hand held against the cave walls. The hand that made it and/ or modeled for it is believed to be 27,000 years old. That day I put my hand in the hand of the ancient one I felt some deep shift of compassion within me and a kind of wiry tenacious joy take hold of my spirit. I felt it on my pulses, I felt in my hammering heart, and in my deep breathing after, to calm my hammering heart.

I think now of some lines from the *Third Meditation* by Theodore Roethke, son of horticulturalists, whelped in a greenhouse:

“Was it yesterday I stretched out the thin bones of my innocence?
O the songs we hide, singing only to ourselves!
Once I could touch my shadow, and be happy;
In the white kingdoms, I was light as a seed,
Drifting with the blossoms,
A pensive petal.

But a time comes when the vague life of the mouth no longer suffices:
The dead make more impossible demands from their silences.
The soul stands, lonely in its choice
Waiting, itself a slow thing,
In the changing body’.

I don’t have to have an actual hand-to-hand with the ancient ones to get a few bees buzzing in my bonnet. I can hardly poke my nose outside the front door without reconsidering this great tradition I’m heir to and wondering where does that leave us poets in our Dinnseanchas? Last week I stood on Feltrim Hill, beloved of Samuel Beckett, overlooking as it does the coast north of Dublin down towards Portrane and the lunatic asylum there where, in the words of Beckett, “the tears of the world are held”. Feltrim Hill, the beautifully named Ridge of the Wolves, will soon be flattened if it continues to be quarried, and a new Dinnseanchas might call it *Site where materials were extracted to fuel a great economic disaster* but that is perhaps a digression into “deconstructed ridges with real extinct wolves on them”.

5

The oldest known bee, according to Professor George Poinar in the journal *Science*, is a 100 million year old specimen found in Myanmar —preserved in amber, the hardened sap of an ancient tree; it is at least (at least!) 35 to 45 million years older than any previously known bee fossil.

I access this information through the world wide web, which I prefer to think of as a kind of hive mind. Outward manifestation of the inner space of all who use it, or abuse it, who make a digital intervention in the virtual zone.

The Myanmar bee is the missing link in our honeybee lineage and finding its image on screen is an encounter I find very moving — I am reading the past, the distant past. As I examine the bee in the amber of a million year old forest’s sap, I am reminded of a poem of Eavan Boland’s, called ‘Amber’, from the “Letters to the Dead” section of her 2007 book, *Domestic Violence*:

“It never mattered that there was once a vast grieving:

trees on their hillsides, in their groves weeping—
a plastic gold dropping

through seasons and centuries to the ground –
until now.

On this fine September afternoon from which you are absent
I am holding, as if my hand could store it,
an ornament of amber

you once gave me.

Reason says this:
The dead cannot see the living.
The living will never see the dead again.

The clean air we need to find each other in is
gone forever, yet

this resin once
collected seeds, leaves and even small feathers as it fell
and fell

which now in a sunny atmosphere seem alive as
they ever were

as though the past could be present and memory itself
a Baltic honey—

a chafing at the edges of the seen, a showing off
of just how much
can be kept safe

inside a flawed translucence.”

The article in *Science* prompts me to make a beeline to the dictionaries and before long I’m back with the Greeks: *meli* their word for honey. As *melos* is their word for song. Mellifluous melody I’m hearing from the word hive. And that’s before I probe my Dineen, which I see I bought in Derry in November 1983 exactly 30 years ago. There I find the *cáca milis*, the sweet cake, and *milseán*, the sweet candy of childhood. And it’s there in the Indo-European, the true grandmother tongue for anyone speaking Irish or English. Melit or Medu (medu which gives us mead) : English, Latin, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, Iranian, Slavic, Baltic, Celtic, Armenian, Albanian, Hittite.

Feeling fiercely mellivorous of a sudden, mellivorous being a word that the dictionary angel snags my eye on, and feeling a sudden urgent need to feed on

honey, the thing itself rather than its signifier, I open the tin of Ikarian honey. The last of the tins I brought home in June, from the island of Ikaria in the Eastern Aegean.

There's a bee's wing, from off a distant cousin to the 100 million year old bee in the amber of Myanmar, intact in the spoonful of honey. The taste of Ikaria. The smell of the mountain suddenly, climbing the Aetheros, (isn't that a great name for a mountain) on the way to a panagiri, a village festival where we watched dancers dance till dawn their ancient patterns to a traditional music whose origins are ancient too and may be as significant, for all I know, as bee dancing. Who knows what patterns of nourishment they signal? Ikaria is the island Dionysus was born on, and I believe this in the marrow of my bones after six or seven hours with the music.

The people of Ikaria find it hard to say whether the 'Ikariotikos' is a dance or an instrumental piece of music. Music here cannot be separated from dance. In fact, certain musicians refuse to play the instrumental music without the presence of dancers. The old musicians say they take their measure from the dancers: they fix on the best ones and let them lead them all night in the tunes.

And then to walk down the mountain at dawn, as the earth heats up and the tunes die down and the bees start up. To drowse with all the doors and windows open on the edge of the village and yes, for it is indeed, beyond a doubt, a bee loud glade, to sleep to the tune of the honeybees.

There'll be honey and yoghurt for breakfast, and we'll sit to counting syllables and recreating the intricate, even fancy, footwork of the dancers in the lines we'll call, if we are lucky, if we are blessed, poems.

Carol Ann Duffy hymns the bees in her collection of 2011, *The Bees*. 'Bees' the first poem in that book draws a direct line from a poet's nib to the fruit of the bees. The page become an "imaginary dance that maps a route to real honeyflowers".

Here are my bees,
brazen, blurs on paper,
besotted, buzzwords dancing
their flawless airy maps,

Been deep, my poet bees,
in the parts of flowers,
in daffodil, thistle, rose, even
the golden lotus; so glide
gilded, glad, golden thus —

wise — and know of us:
how your scent pervades
my shadowed, busy heart,
and honey is art.

6

I first came to Ikaria, a bee drawn to a flower meadow, because of a poem, W.H.Auden's, 'Musée des Beaux Arts':

"About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along."

— the poem opens. And keeps on opening.

The museum of fine arts in question is in Brussels where Auden meditated before the painting 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted in 1565 after Ovid's version of the myth. Auden dates his poem December 1938 and, like the sonnets he wrote in the same year, it carries more than a whiff of the coming times, the sulphur of fascism, the stench of the ovens.

The myth tells of the escape from Minoan Crete of Dedalos, the epitome of a Bronze Age craftsmen, and his son Ikarus. Dedalos you will remember built a contraption for King Minos' wife, Pasiphae, so that Poseidon's white bull could mount her. She carried the Minotaur to term and gave birth to the half bull, half man, who then had to live out his days in the Labyrinth, a maze like prison below the Royal Palace. Kate Newmann, in her 2001 collection, *The Blind Woman in the Blue House*, has a fine poem in the voice of Pasiphae looking back as an old woman on that escapade:

I saw the bull
and I loved that moment.
I loved him, the way he was.
I understood Europa well then.
Beautiful, white
with long eyelashes above
his big eyes,
and soft skin
on his chest, between his legs.
If you had touched.

Minos, learning that Dedalos has assisted Pasiphae in her transgression, imprisons him and his son in the labyrinthine prison. To escape, Dedalos constructs two sets of wings. The quill feathers are fastened with thread but the smaller feathers are connected by wax, and Dedalos warns Ikaros in these terms as he straps on the wings and sets their course from Crete for Athens:

“My son, be warned! Neither soar too high, lest the sun melt the wax; nor swoop too low, lest the feathers be wetted by the sea”. The boy Ikaros, does he listen to his father? He does not, the boy flies too near the sun in a rapture of flight, the wax melts, the boy plunges to the sea and is drowned. Dedalos retrieves his body and buries him on the island which is named for him, Ikaria. At least that’s one version of the myth. And you can also read the myth as emblematic of the lost wax method of metal casting, brought to a fine art in the Minoan Bronze Age.

It is the poem, as I said, based on the painting that is based on the myth, that drew me to the island of Ikaria in the first place. I feel at home there. I believe I am genetically predisposed to live where lemons grow, where the olive grows, in the bee loud glades and mountains where the bees feed on wild oregano and pine, where the honey is strong and sustaining; where I can meditate on the nature of failure, on our contraptions that plunge to earth, again and again and again, but were worth the lift into the blue rapture of what is, after all, inner space. Whatever the cost, For we use the myths as mirrors, as we use dreams, as we use poems.

An aside: Another of the myths in the Dedalian, if I may, cluster of stories had Dedalus using an actual honeycomb to cast a section of hive in pure gold, again read as emblematic of the lost wax method of metal casting. Michael Ayrton, the painter, and the goldsmith, John Donald, were commissioned in 1968 by Edmund Hillary, a keen beekeeper as well as the man who climbed Everest with Tenzing Norgay who probably called the mountain Chomolungma. Hillary asked them to replicate the legendary golden honey-comb of Dedalus, and well pleased with the result hung the sculpture in his garden in New Zealand, where his own real bees used it for their hive and for their young, and made real honey there in the cast gold comb.

The Bronze Age bees are buzzing about my head whenever I teach Auden’s poem: and at some point in most discussions someone will talk about the failure of poets in the face of politics, the failure of poetry to stop war, to avert fascist dictatorship, to speak up for the oppressed; or, having spoken for the oppressed, to effect any amelioration of their oppression. Someone will always say, “and didn’t Auden also hold that poetry makes nothing happen? In his elegy for Yeats. Didn’t he? Didn’t he?”

And that usually closes it all down again.

But, maybe we might read that ‘nothing’ as a positive thing. If poetry makes *nothing* happen, maybe it stops *something* happening, stops time, takes our breath away. Though, strange that taking our breath away, being breathtaking, is associated with achievement, accomplishment. Maybe it’s like the negative space in a painting by which what is there is revealed, to be apprehended by human consciousness.

Perhaps like those marginal spaces that tempted our first manuscript poets, with their bee-quick, jewel-like utterances about some fleeting truth of the natural

world, sharp darting glimpses out the scriptorium window — “imaginary kingdoms of God with real blackbirds singing”, as it were — which certainly puts a pleasing spin on the margins moving to the centre.

Maybe the truth in poetry is not in the words per se. The individual words have autonomous force, I would say magic power, in terms of their auditory force on the physical body, and shadow power too in the ghost life of the word, the etymology, the discrete history that each word carries with it, etymologies that if we could trace far enough back might be analogous to hearing the buzzing of the 100 million year old bee in amber.

Much of the truth force of a poem inheres in the rhythmic patterns, or lack of them, the breath patternings, the poem’s designs on taking our breath away, the organizing of the words into rhetorical patterns, periodic phrases, anaphoric utterance that carries us up, up, up and out of the earthbound stricture of the poem, the craft free of gravity, true agent of flight.

Our truth contraptions. That make nothing happen.

7

Always, there is someone who has gone before.

A poet wrote this, of the island of Ikaria:

Here, he feels is peace,
The world is not after all a shambles

And, granted there is no God, there are gods at least, at least in
Greece,
And begins to drowse; but his dreams are troubled...

This also:

And there are prisoners really, here in the hills, who would not agree
To sign for their freedom, whether in doubt of
Such freedom or having forgotten or never having known what it meant
to be free.

Louis Mac Neice never names Ikaria but those lines are from a poem set there, called ‘The Island’ published in *Burnt Offerings* in 1951. I like to think of the poem as “an imaginary island with real political prisoners in it”. The poem, like the rest of the collection, was generally hammered by the critics when it was published.

Ikaria island was a prison island for Communists during the civil war of the nineteen forties. The impoverished islanders had billeted on them the leaders of

the workers, the left wing intelligentsia, and the artists, including the Greek O’Riada, Mikis Theodorakis; this is where he first heard the wild traditional mountain music and the rembetika, the workers’ songs of the Athenian ghetto, and integrated these with his classical training to produce a music that would salve the heart of, strengthen the spirit of, the Greek people, especially in times of crisis.

There were still prisoners there in August of 1951 when MacNeice arrived on the island.

Exiling troublemakers is nothing new for Athens: Euripides, the great poet-dramatist of Classical Athens (480 – 406 BCE) was also banished to Ikaria and found in the remnants of orgiastic rituals, in their music and dance, the lineaments of a tradition that he explored in *The Bacchae*. On Ikaria he found, or conjured, Maenads — devotees of long haired Dionysus, agents of trance dance and transcendental union with the god.

I am typing in the wintry light of a November morning. News of Doris Lessing’s death earlier today is buzzing around the virtual zone and reaches me here. I read this on my screen, my interface with the hive mind. I am stung. Exactly that.

I would like to tell the bees Lessing is gone, that a great spirit has left our earth. To observe one of the traditional services to the dead: to tell the bees. Do we tell the bees, as the folk practice has it, so they can carry the news to every part of the parish or as far as the bell carries over a green as the *Bechbretha* delineates human settlement, within sound of the bell? Or do we tell the bees to say irrevocably to ourselves that, yes, the loved one is dead?

I bless the name of Doris Lessing in gratitude, her *Golden Notebook* my handbook to womanhood and the inner city of my body. I’ve called up on screen whirling dervishes in their Sufic rapture for she frequently made use in her work of the Sufi figure of the hidden master. They make me restless for the out of doors; before the light fades, and in the knowledge that the moon is waxing full, I head for Aideen’s grave up on Howth Head.

8

Aideen’s grave is a dolmen, more usually known nowadays as a portal tomb, at least five thousand years old; there are many folk beliefs and legends clustered about it. Sir Samuel Ferguson’s lay, *The Cromlech on Howth*, published in London in 1886, has shaped the folklore since then, challenging our usual belief that folklore shapes the literature. In truth, it is always a dance between two partners. Aideen was the wife of Oscar, son of Oisín, grandson of Fionn MacCumhaill of the Fianna band of warriors.

The local lore also knows the portal tomb as Fionn MacCumhaill’s Quoit, one of many Howth associations with the Fenian Cycle of stories where the Head

appears in its Irish name of Binn Éadair. Whatever the truth or fancy of it as a burial place for Aideen, even in its collapsed state the tomb is an impressive place, overlooking the sweep of Dublin Bay from the North.

You can enter the chamber and lie on one of the fallen portal stones, feel the immense 75 ton weight of the quartzite capstone over your body. It focuses the mind wonderfully. It certainly focused mine, when I would lie there as a young woman. You must certainly not entertain any imaginings of what might happen should the earth move or should there be a ground tremor. If you can deal with the physical reality, it is a powerful way to connect with the ancestors, to connect with their mysteries.

It seemed to me as a young woman that lying in the tomb was akin to the ancient Bardic training of lying with a stone on your belly in the dark, a fine fettling of the soul, an encounter with what William Blake called 'mind forged manacles', one's own deepest fears.

It was at this time in my life too, that I found, cast up on the beach of consciousness, Gary Snyder's *Regarding Wave*, which I hold to this day in the highest regard. There I found the injunctive 'What you should know to be a poet', a poem I took literally, perhaps after all being one of Marianne Moore's "literalists of the imagination". The trick was, as Alan Watt so succinctly put it, to avoid "climbing up the signpost instead of following the road."

What you should know to be a poet

all you can know about animals as persons.

the names of trees and flowers and weeds.

the names of stars and the movements of planets

and the moon.

your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind.

at least one kind of traditional magic:

divination, astrology, the *book of changes*, the tarot;

dreams.

the illusory demons and the illusory shining gods.

and, the poem goes on:

work, long dry hours of dull work swallowed and accepted

and lived with and finally loved. exhaustion,

hunger, rest.

the wild freedom of the dance, *extasy*

silent solitary illumination, *enstasy*

real danger. gambles. and the edge of death.

And now I am lying in Aideen's grave, thinking of Doris Lessing and *The Golden Notebook*, which I note in one of my own notebooks as "a d.i.y. manual for cracking up and putting yourself back together again." It was published in 1962 when I was seven years of age, making my first Holy Communion; it was just down the road for me in those wild Howth days of satsang and satori, lying in wait on the path to be read and to detonate with a force that would blast me like some booster rocket into a new space — the other half of the human story, the poems and stories of women — and into a new orbit, "imaginary spacecraft with real female astronaut in it".

Dusk, now, and I walk back down the hill. I meet a local woman near the Castle, and the talk turns to the year's honey, the new hives, the practical class in bee-keeping over at the Community School. She has no honey to sell this year but will give me a jar for old times' sake.

"Do you remember the plan we had to steal Yeats' Tarot deck?" she shouts after me as we part. I carry that line home with me – a little golden sweetener on the night of Doris Lessing's passing, as if that old Sufi herself had arranged the encounter.

9

She is mis-remembering. I had once pitched a film to my beekeeping friend, in her earlier incarnation as a film producer— the synopsis of which, if I remember rightly, was something like this:

"A bunch of teenagers living wild on Howth Head get into magic practices from half baked notions of druidic lore. They dream up a transition year documentary film project on the poet W.B. Yeats, focusing on the years when he lived in Howth, when he himself was a teenager.

They read his *Autobiographies* and discover on Howth Head the cave he used to sleep in, his ear to the ground so that he could hear the heartbeat of the great mother. They read of how he fell in love with a red-haired girl, a distant cousin, Laura Armstrong, the daughter of an army sergeant. Of how he took the window out of his attic room so he could sleep with the wind washing through.

With the support of their gullible English and Art teachers, they go to the National Library in Dublin and, under the guise of interviewing the woman who curated the Yeats exhibition there, conspire to get their hands on Yeats' actual Tarot deck. From then on strange things happen in their circle. Not supernatural things but ordinary magical things, black and white: falling in love, betrayal of friendship, gang loyalty, music and drugs and families falling apart — real magic in their actual lives, and all around them, shape-shifting between real and imagined, the beautiful Howth peninsula.“

We never did get the production money together.

Yeats used the tarot, astrology, automatic writing, believed in these practices, not a million miles from Gary Snyder's imperatives in 'What you should know to be a poet' if you remember —

your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind.

at least one kind of traditional magic:

divination, astrology, the *book of changes*, the tarot...

Yeats the dreamer is the one I love most, I prefer him to the man of action, the theatre manager, the shaper and shifter. He ends his *Autobiographies*, (note the plural) with this meditation on the Nobel Prize for Literature which he was awarded in 1923:

“I was in my Galway house during the first months of civil war, the railway bridges blown up and the roads blocked with stones and trees. For the first week there was no newspapers, no reliable news, we did not know who had won nor who had lost, and even after newspapers came, one never knew what was happening on the other side of the hill or of the line of trees...Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries. One felt an overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature. A stare (our west of Ireland name for a starling) had built in a hole beside my window and I made these verses out of the feeling of the moment —

The bees build in the crevices
Of loosening masonry, and there
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.
My wall is loosening; honey bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house is burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

He goes on:

“Presently a strange thing happened. I began to smell honey in places where honey could not be, at the end of a stone passage or at some windy turn of the road, and it always came with certain thoughts.”

Sweet Yeats! His instinct, his intuition, his sixth sense, his watchful, elegant mind.

And now I am home again. An e-mail has come in, a beemail, perhaps, from Jim Holland, enclosing an article he wrote for the November issue of *The Irish Beekeeper*. It ends with a beautiful description of the new queen being introduced into the hive:

“... the bees will rush to welcome her by fanning everywhere, on the floor of the hive, on the sides and on the frames; it is a trumpeting and caroling...”

And I swear I can smell honey. At my desk, from the books on my desk. Dineen and the *Bechbretha*, Messrs Yeats and Snyder, Ms Moore and Ms Boland and Ms Duffy, the whole room buzzing, all the bees in my bonnet wide awake. The real and the imaginary worlds fitted one into the other in a glorious golden light.