

**On the Verge Writing Contest 2020,
Second-Place Poetry Winner**

By Jordan Munteer

Italian Honey Bee (*Apis mellifera ligustica*)

(I)

On the dogwoods pollen heavies
with the virility of yellow,

their wooing like poems carried
between lovers on the legs of bees.

To recognize the elegance of design
is to admit that language has imposed itself –

pistil, stamen, anther. That *insect*
is another word for procreation,

the unseen work of intermediary Cupids
who detect which flowers are untapped

by their opposing electrical charges. Mythology
no less impressive in its science.

Consider Aristaeus and his sacrificial cows,
bloating in the sun until they burst with new life.

You've missed the point by not taking it
for granted: watch, how in their perennial task

of gathering for someone else
they ask for nothing.

(II)

It is the image that comes to mind
when someone mentions grace

in conversation – my father in white
tending to the hives, a swarm

gentling on his mesh mask and gloves.
The spicy fug of wax when he lifts the lids.

He inspects the combs for caps,
papery plugs over each hexagonal tube

sealing in the honey like a trade secret –
the alchemy of honey. You imagine

to be as rapt with the thoroughness
of his labour is to glean, if only momentarily

from his membership with bees,
what it is to know compassion –

to be held accountable to something greater
than yourself. He replaces the lids, scoops

a layer of dead drones into his palm
where he saves them in his pocket.

(III)

A worker totters the ceramic rim of your coffee,
glutted on leftover crystals of sugar.

The impatience of its wings when not in flight
maintain a murmur, as though a breath over

the strings of a violin – the letter V trilling
like a circumferential ache around the cup.

Perhaps metaphor is the debt we pay
for sympathizing with their small existences.

We want it to mean more. Something
that will take the sting out of mortality,

that will leave us kinder in the end.

Your wife, a book splayed open on her knees,

looks up. Her stillness, like a pair of wings
wet and greeting light, contains the truth of it:

let the response to an awareness nothing lasts be love.

You hear it only when the cup of her mouth

spills into yours, the yellow of a bee held
beneath her tongue, singing.