

O we were full of wonder in those days – wonder and hunger half the time, it kept us going. There was one man especially who'd draw out the *oobs* and *aabs* – he'd come round the gardens with a rusty pick-up, once a month or so I guess, always peddling something from under a tarp in the back. He had rings and three gold teeth and a denim jacket clustered with badges – yellow smileys, wings, stars, insignia, all sorts.

This time he lifted the tarp and shuffled out a cow skin from a pile of them spreadeagled. All still with the hair on, you didn't see that much back then. 'And there's something else, you'll like this,' he said, and he went to the cab for a backpack and pulled out something heavy, wrapped in a bundle of black cloth.

*Honey.* He took out a glass jar of honey as big as your head and held it up to the light. He unscrewed the lid and passed it round with a twig dipped in for tasting. You could only have a taste, he said, it came from the trunk of an ancient apple tree that had split in two. Pulled apart by the weight of its own branches and there it was, the heavy comb dark orange almost glowing in the trunk's black hollow, and the gentle sound of bees exposed.

We'd never eaten honey. We'd tried to bring the bees before but only half-hearted, it wasn't until the taste of it was in us. The colour as he raised it up to the light and the taste still alive in our mouths, we talked about it for a week or more and soon we were setting our minds on bees bees *bees* and it took two years, I think, after that to draw them in. From where I don't know, two years of careful flower planting, a whole calendar garden so there was something in full flower from February right to November, a turning wheel of relentless colour – and cyclamen, aconite, butterbur through the deepest winter too.

Nothing the first year. Music on deaf ears, a bee garden with no bees.

But the second year they came, May-time here and there, and whenever we saw them we dropped what we were doing and followed them half the day as best we could, we lost them and found them again, we ran after them lost them again stood on a lane where geese were tugging up grasses on the edge of the soy fields and we stood and stood listening for that buzz and when we heard it again we bolted after it all day quite mad laughing too and soon we found more and *there*: they were passing in and out of a high dead hollowed beech trunk some way up. The teeming hum of them.

So we'd found the hive and then didn't really know what to do with it. We had our own empty hives, three, between the flowers and the orchard a mile or so away but we couldn't bring ourselves to raid this trunk and run a botch-job breaking it all up, so we went back to work in the gardens and argued over what to do for a day or two and just left them there where we knew we could find them when we wanted.

We visited the bees. We thought of the honey up there. Then we brought the empty hives to the beech trunk in parts and stacked them up and just left them there in the end and hoped for the best, and six months down the line one of the hives had bees in. They were curious, I suppose, they found the space conducive and moved on in. Then later we took the hive back to the gardens, really bloody carefully, a hundred yards at a time and the bees stayed on. They stayed.

We told the man with the golden teeth – peddling knives and pots and pans this time – we told him his honey had fired us up and his eyes widened.

He went quiet and then he laughed and laughed and stroked his beard and laughed some more and shook his head. 'That was corn syrup, not honey! It was just a story! My old dad always told me "Give em a story and they'll buy whatever you're selling." It wasn't real honey it was corn syrup, I had a few jars I'd filled from a big tin out of a factory in Bedford on my way round.

Good god. And now you've got bees. 'The first bees I've heard of in years, good god it's a wonder.'

He was still laughing as he drove the pick-up off down the dusty track and we turned to go back to the gardens.