In *The Annotated Bee and Me*, Tim Bowling collates and builds poems based on his Great-Aunt Gladys Muttart’s fifteen-page chapbook, called “The Annotated Bee,” about the family’s beekeeping history. With the black-and-white photographs of Great-Aunt Gladys as a baby and an older woman, some of other family members, and a “not unskilled” drawing of a girl looking up at bees (Gladys’s self-portrait?), Bowling captures the intimate nature of this chapbook as a kind of family heirloom. Bowling suggests how his great-aunt’s care in preserving family history may be likened to a kind of honey gathering to be enjoyed after the season is over. Recording and annotating the past may also be seen as a way of understanding life’s processes: birth, mating (including the proverbial sexual association with bees as “the birds and the bees”), death, time and memory.

Just as the Queen Bee is chosen and then dies only to be ushered “to the wintry edge of love” (20), so the great-aunt on her death bed is “blind” and “attended by her colony” or extended family. The young speaker somewhat humorously threatens his cousin Jack, who suffers from anaphylactic shock and is afraid of being taken into the presence of his dying relative, that he will take him to the Queen Bee, his dying aunt. From the speaker’s remark about Jack’s reaction to this child threat, “You should have seen the terror / in his eyes” (19), we are brought to the speaker’s own reaction to watching his great-aunt “stung” by death: “You should have seen / the terror in my eyes” (20).

Bowling is adept at bringing what isn’t in the chapbook to our attention, the elliptical treatment of certain details an indication of their unspoken importance. The poet speaker begins:

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I stand in the history
this family book
does not contain –
of Will, slaughtered
at Etaples, and blue-eyed Earl,
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my uncle freshly gone to ether,
who danced at twenty-one
among the liberating fusillades
and then for sixty years at home
handled nakedly the swarm,
and Will’s betrothed, who staggered
with relief or pain
into the arms of Frank, his brother,
returned intact (19–20)

With the break between Earl’s “blue eyes” and “ether,” an important association is established that will come up again in this intricately connected collection of poems. The line breaks in this passage expertly create irony, for instance in the line about Earl “who danced at twenty one” but not as we would expect, with a sweetheart, but instead “among the fusillades.” Or the line tension produced by Will’s betrothed feeling “relief or pain” in the arms of his brother Frank, returned “intact” from the war. Altogether a macabre effect is created this mixed choreography of life, mixing the positive with the negative in equal measure.

Further developing the image of the Queen Bee with her “reign” measured by her life-span as a metaphor for Time, the speaker associates our “days” with, paradoxically, both “chains” that limit and “wings” that uplift, in which there is “flight” to gather the “lost self, the old mood,” like honey:

...We
labour, sullen and joyous, for the Queen, Time,
and kill her, and choose her, and kill her again.
Such is the metrical sexton of our service, (43)

Here the processes inside the beehive provide an analogue for life, including its ritual not only of “killing” the queen bee but also of honey-making or writing poems. The record is like honey gathered and stored in the memory of the honeycomb

I follow
as far as I can, which isn’t far –
in middle life, the range of an ordinary man
is more than the bee’s two miles, less
than the salmon’s ten thousand. (43)

Bowling has a way of evoking paradox through iconic images such as the “bone in the missing leg / of the three-legged dog” that “is fluted by black lips,” or later, the “bear’s paw in the hive” that “becomes the swarm” (45).

In the poem “On Sex,” the bees component of the “the birds and the bees” takes on a new aspect that includes a dialectic of death in its lovemaking. Just as the mating ritual of the honeybee takes place in flight, and involves the injection of the drone’s sexual organ into the queen bee’s body where they remain, causing the drone’s death, so human birth with its attendant ritual of circumcision is seen as a kind of ritual mini-death in which several thousand nerve endings are severed: “We had to learn the hard way: / the world is theft / from the very first spasm” (48).

Balancing this sobering thought with a lighter, more satirical one, the adjacent “Poem Found in an Abandoned Hive” applies this honeybee metaphor and its mythology to the poet as a figure in the community, describing the poet in the following meagre and modestly existential terms:

The life of the poet is relatively long, unless he fulfills
his destiny by mating. In spite of his being a drag on
the domestic economy of the nation he is suffered
gladly, tolerated and even pampered by all. (49)

However, this favour that poets periodically experience inside the community is not ever-lasting since, “as the autumn / deepens, in front of the cafes and generally around the /city will be seen the dead husks of poets, finally having / succumbed to starvation and the weather.”

Bowling has created a well-made and intricate book whose physicality and uniqueness hark back to when books were handmade and bound: a treasure to hold and read. Just like Great-Aunt Muttart’s little chapbook (minus the reported coffee stains!), it is an heirloom with an interweaving of the poet’s words among the old words that makes it transcend familial interests to include a larger readership with backgrounds similar only in their dissimilarities.
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