

SALLY WEN MAO
Mad Honey Soliloquies

Xenophon, 401 BC

The soldiers straddled thorn hedges
to sneak a taste. Along the Black Sea,
the honeycombs rose like marmalade jars.
Laurel, scorched oleander, and honey,
that yellow voltage. I tried a drop myself.
Some tasted ambrosia.
Some heard prophetic hymns.
Some cringed at tremors blooming again,
youth in their chests, windshorn Eridanus,
then in the sky, an atomized sun.
And me, I got nothing.
Just another lonesome breeze
freezing my ribs until my muscles
stopped moving. Finally I spat it out.
Like that, my men snapped forward,
purging everything. They purged the honey,
the oleanders, the olives. They purged the suppers
from all the nights they'd ever pined.
They purged the junipers, the stars,
the salt and seaweed. They purged the ocean,
the canker, the long fortnights
spent far away—the Kurdistan mountains
unlike any hillock back home. Imagine:
a field of grown men on all fours.
Armored men in full panoply.
Even through all of this, I fell asleep
half-hoping for a vision, insight, anything.
I would have taken intoxication,
even gagging. As I led these young men
through the waning terrain, the only
prayer I dared was *rid us of our collective needs*.
Socrates once asked me, if all memories
are theaters, then what can we make
of the shadow scenes, the ones that lurk,
unseen and unexplained? The question came back
when I saw the dew blind them.
And then at dawn they rose like revenants.

Pompey, 67 BC

It was swarm season—of honey and carnage:
one moment men scavenged, the next they were carrion

under an orange sky. It was swarm season
and before you could count to ten, quivers raked,

stars aimed, a thousand twigs rustled, fell.
Honey and carnage, divesting us of reflex.

It was swarm season. In the sweltering evening, blood
was scented, pure delphinium. Honey and carnage:

Delphi once prophesied, *The man who eats meli chloron
can speak only truth.* Whose sentence was this,

the pleasure of green honey? Ribs flashed,
tongues wagging, sliced off, churning, stumps for speech.

It was swarm season—over before anyone
could bray. But a few mouths were open in surprise.