

I am proud of my California poppies, which have reseeded themselves two years in a row, and bring the seven-year-old over to look at them. He is learning about pollination in school, and he crouches down and runs his finger inside the orange petals, moving pollen from flower to flower. *Are you pollinating them?* I ask him, and he nods and stands up to show me his powdery fingertips. *Cheeto fingers*, I tell him. He does not know what a Cheeto is. *Like a little chip made out of fake cheese*. He wrinkles his nose. *But why would I want to eat fake cheese?* Last week, I trimmed down the bush of poppies; the stems were slowly graying and reached almost to the sidewalk; a few blooms were caught in the screen door, growing into the darkness of the porch.

This month's folder is labeled Bee Culture, an apparent mishmash of former folders. When I choose a folder each month, I make a list of things I could write about:

Honey — Andre [sic] — *bees on my shirt* — Rae's line about bees — sugar water — Marcus pollinating a flower with his finger — Cheeto dust — *eating the whole of something*

Almost none of these are about the picture itself (fig. 1) but the cloud that bee culture might describe within the parameters of my life. I ate one flavored honey stick from Samaha's and gave up on honey for the rest of my life. Andrei, a mentor I had in high school, raised bees on his sprawling property off the turnpike and insisted I take spoonfuls of the honey when I was sick. There was a tiny kitchenette in his studio, situated behind the backdrop, mostly for making screwdrivers but also, sometimes, honeyed tea. He taught me how to shoot large format. In one of our early writing workshops, Raegan Bird wrote about leading lost bees out the door with a rag dipped in lavender oil. When a hummingbird got trapped inside the museum, I made sugar water and tried to coax the bird outside, but eventually instead I used a microfiber cloth to grab its small shining body. The eye was very small. The fluttering left prints on the glass. When I lifted my phone to photograph its face, the hummingbird flew up into one of the trees. In the museum, the educators tell children on tours to pretend they have Cheeto dust on their fingers; this is why we should not touch the art.

The spoils of the hunt are eaten with the fingers. My parents did not teach us how to pick our own food from the earth or in the grocery store. I didn't know you could eat the honeycomb like this. She looks like she's eating a truffle, she's taking a bite too big. If she were the seven-year-old I babysit, I would tell her to slow down. Her eyes are cast downward toward the honeycomb, toward the floor, toward her tweed jacket. She is trapped mid-image by the flash, her head tilted to the side, fitting the honeycomb into her mouth, opening wide. Maybe she is listless. But she is eating the whole of something, cramming it into her mouth, almost like force-feeding, a spidery hand shoving something down. She could be making herself vomit.

Most of the photographs I've chosen for *Picture Files* aren't of people, because it's stranger to write about people and what they're doing, to project onto them without context. Is she enjoying herself? I can see her two front teeth. Does her tongue slide in and out of each comb? *The sweet, sticky wild honey is consumed comb and all. It tastes wonderful but is very messy.* Do I know what pleasure looks like? Can it be photographed? Can feeling be photographed? I don't know what my own pleasure looks like. Whenever I look at pictures I think of other pictures: this time, Aura Rosenberg's *Head Shots*, photographs of men shown ostensibly



mid-orgasm, close-ups of their faces grimacing or exhaling, eyes rolled back. Pleasure is difficult to ascribe to another person's image. One picture, *Head Shots* (JM), 1991-1996, shows the photographer's feet on a hairy chest, the subject's eyes closed and his face drawn tight. In other pictures, we see the whites of eyes, hands pressed to the temples. We don't know whether the photographs are explicitly of orgasm; Rosenberg says in an interview that they offer the men opportunity to fake their pleasure too, that women's pleasure is often faked.



I write to you from another month where I am physically ill. It is tiring to talk about because it is boring: there is a dull ache in my chest, or a sharp ache, and eventually, through a daisy chain of tests and imaging, each going slightly further than the one prior, someone discovers my gallbladder is empty. I nearly shit myself on the 215 a few weeks before I understood something was wrong. Being physically ill is an administrative burden; I speak to five different departments to schedule one MRI. I speak to multiple people to have the imaging results sent to another doctor, which I'm still not sure will happen. The MRI takes place before sunrise at the hospital; the technicians tuck blankets around

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me and do a bad job on the IV. I sleep on the couch for an hour before work, and all day, the urge to pee comes when it's almost too late, and my whole body bears down to push the piss out.

A physical illness has persisted for nearly four years inside of me, the length of my undergraduate degree. I feel displaced from pleasure; the more my body happens to me, the less I feel capable of using it for what I want. I didn't intend for this newsletter to chronicle sickness, although I find that looking at pictures grounds me in my body the same way that swimming does, and the illness is grounded there too. I like the physical aspects of looking at pictures: how to hold a book on your lap and write at the same time, how dry my hands get after going through the folders, how nice it feels to look at something other than a screen, to wander over to the stacks and pull down relevant books. I love pictures. I feel lucky to be able to use my body for pictures: for making them, looking at them, writing about them. Employing chance, randomizing which drawer I look at — the writing about the pictures still has to come from the same place. It comes from the body. Have I ever wanted to devour something whole? I eat very fast, so that I don't have to look at what I'm doing.

Another note I made for this month: MOPA *dead bees in the stairwell* – something from the 50s. The building burned down in the late seventies, so I was wrong. The side stairwell was often full of dead bees, their dusty bodies clustered along the windowsills and beneath my feet, too many of them to avoid. When I finally asked Manny, the maintenance worker, what had happened, he told me they had sprayed the building with something decades ago that kills the bees when they burrow into the walls. Before the new building went up at the corner of Park Boulevard and El Cajon, I walked to the bus along the west side of Park, down a sidewalk lined with untamed grass and plants painstakingly watered by neighborhood volunteers. Bees would land on my shirt or pants as I waited to cross the long angle of the street, and I learned not to be afraid of them. They were soft and small and accompanying me; they liked a floral shirt in particular, although that made me sad, how lacking they were in necessary flowers.