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Of August: *Six Sonnets For Herman Melville*

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1

No one who hears the keen mosquitoes whine,
Among the berries and the spiders' lace,
Will quarrel with intelligent design.
Say what you will, they are a higher race.
Combatants fierce, our longings here converge.
Fat Buddhas clustered bluely on the stem,
Their ripeness bursting as the hues emerge,
Transfix me—all the more enraging them.
If I had such unerring aim, such speed,
Such fury, such a murderous intent,
If I could cry out my insatiate greed
And on marauders bilious hatred vent,
I'd find the shyest fruit, the bluest blue.
I'd feast. I'd suck the sweetest pith of you.

2

I walk where deer have fed, coyotes roam.
They've crushed the berries where their feet have trod
And left their prints upon the needled sod,
A scent of wildness in the spongy loam.
In early morning all the beasts have fled
To wooded den and ferny hidden brake,
To marsh and wetland, silent stream and lake,
The beaver's hut, the moose's grassy bed.

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As birds awake, as shadows move and change,
I come to forage what was left behind,
To rove, to see what droppings I can find,
To pilfer in the fox's private range.
Thinking theirs the arduous battle won,
Mosquitoes scream their triumph to the sun.

3

He calls them "enemy of all repose,"
"Ruffler of even tempers," "grievous" pests,
Kind Europe's "accidental" gift to those
Who welcomed with Pacific warmth their guests.
In "thriving colonies" they now "supplant"
The "aboriginal sand-flies" in their path.
Like Europe's white-skinned godhead adamant,
They "buzz, and torment" with Jehovah's wrath.
This "visitation" undermines the toil
Of missionaries' civilizing plan.
"Exasperating natives," raptors foil
"Benevolent labours" of the holy man.
No less on this damp northern coast I see
The rapine that afflicted hot Typee.

4

OK. It's August. Why are you still here?
I'm slathered with disgusting Cutter's stuff.
The heat, the buzzing—I have had enough!
So please. Won't you discreetly disappear?
I get it. This is climate change at work.
I slap at this obnoxious and uncouth
Display of a most inconvenient truth,
The cosmos's humiliating smirk.
I see, you are the darling of the hour.

This season's yours, and I must now defer
My will to your unceasing whine and whirr,
My feeble strength to your unyielding power.
What must I do, or rather how much pay
To make you fold your tents and go away?

5

My devil-god has issued his decree;
Thus powerless I silently obey,
And nun-like, with becoming modesty,
Assume the veil. I take the quiet Way.
My face is covered, all my limbs, my feet,
My skin anointed with protective oil.
I minimize my breath, my scent, my heat,
And swathe my body in the chador's coil.
No mischief now can penetrate my shield;
I boldly walk where I must shrink before.
The demons to my reticence now yield,
And I can gather riches for my store.
Have I been punished? Should I bow or rail?
What happens when a woman takes the veil?

6

I've struck my vein. As far as eye can see,
The berries fill the meadow, woods, and swamp.
The deer can browse, the dogs may freely romp,
And still leave all the bluest ones for me.
It just takes patience, unregarded time,
Deliberation, fingers brisk and light,
The steady hand of woman in her prime
Who's diapered babies, then sat down to write.
I know no other heaven than to rove
Among the billows of this blue expanse,

To watch the berries quiver in their dance
And fling the gauzy drapes the spiders wove.
And I must only make myself be still
To let the berries work their awesome will.