

Arron Santry on *Honeyland*

*Is there Spring?*

*Sure there is.*

The promise of renewal and regeneration, the miraculous arrival of Spring, has sustained humanity for millennia, unchanging as the sun. The ancient astronomical logic of the seasons has been the organising principle of all life on earth – birth, death, rebirth, a holistic cycle that invites cliché but always exceeds it. In our cities, hyperconnected and distracted, nature's cycles must be managed, held at bay in the name of productivity. On the Balkan steppe outside Skopje, however, the force of nature refuses to be ignored.

From the opening shot of *Honeyland*, these cycles are brought to light and interwoven as the camera takes in the sweep of a Macedonian plain, carved through by ancient paths, along which Hatidze, the yellow-bloused beekeeper makes her way. The frame is filled by the expansive landscape, unbordered by the horizon, emphasising her boundness – to the earth, to nature, to time, and to the paths that history has laid for us. Through the compassionate lens of the camera, we see her tend to her bees with a profound care rooted in the wisdom of tradition. Dislodging a sheet of slate from a rock face to reveal a swarming hive, she reaches in and extracts honeycomb with her bare hands. She is not stung.

Hatidze, however, is no mere embodiment of natural harmony. She is isolated, alone with her bedbound mother who is rooted 'like a tree' in their meagre homestead. Periodically travelling to Skopje to sell her honey, we see her charmed by the excesses of city life, an excess she tries to preserve through the purchase of a chestnut hair dye. Her longing for connection is met with the intrusion of a Turkish family who occupy a nearby plot of land, their campervan rolling through the ruins, a herd of cows in tow.

The film stages this collision of worlds with an ambiguity crafted by close observation. The family, chaotic and destructive though they seem, are caught up in the same pressures and fears that motivate Hatidze, whose hospitality is exploited by a father desperate to support his children. The film documents the disruption of the natural order that results, most evident in the

bee-stung faces of the family's children, a palpable image of the toll exacted by the reckless pursuit of profit.

Hatidze's resilience veers towards powerlessness in the face of these new circumstances. Her graceful respect of the natural world – the source of her identity more than simply her means of making a living – becomes a vulnerability, taken advantage of by a world that proceeds according to the logic of profit and productivity. But in the background, behind the spectacle of human drama, the seasons pass, the earth abides.

There is Spring.

Arron Santry is a writer and researcher.