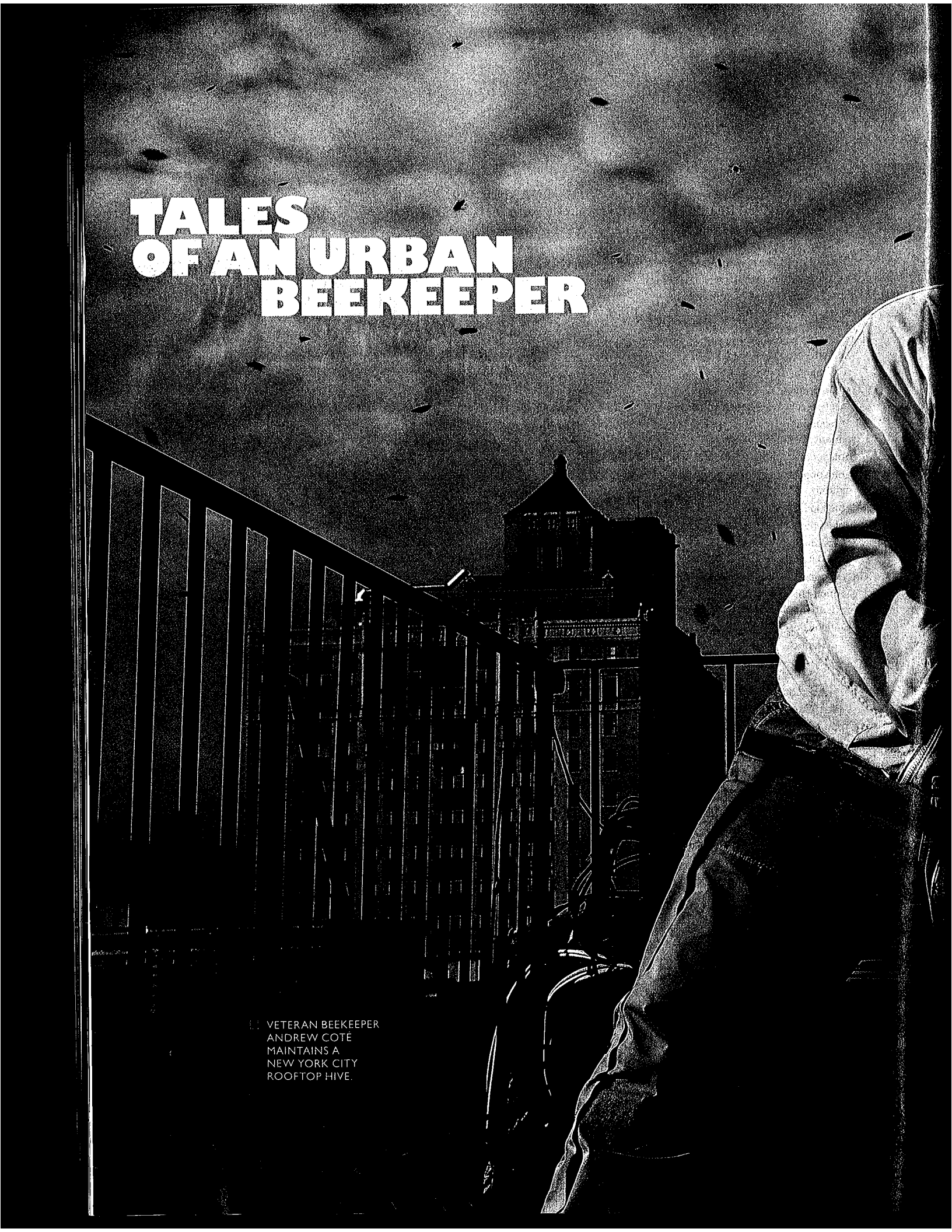
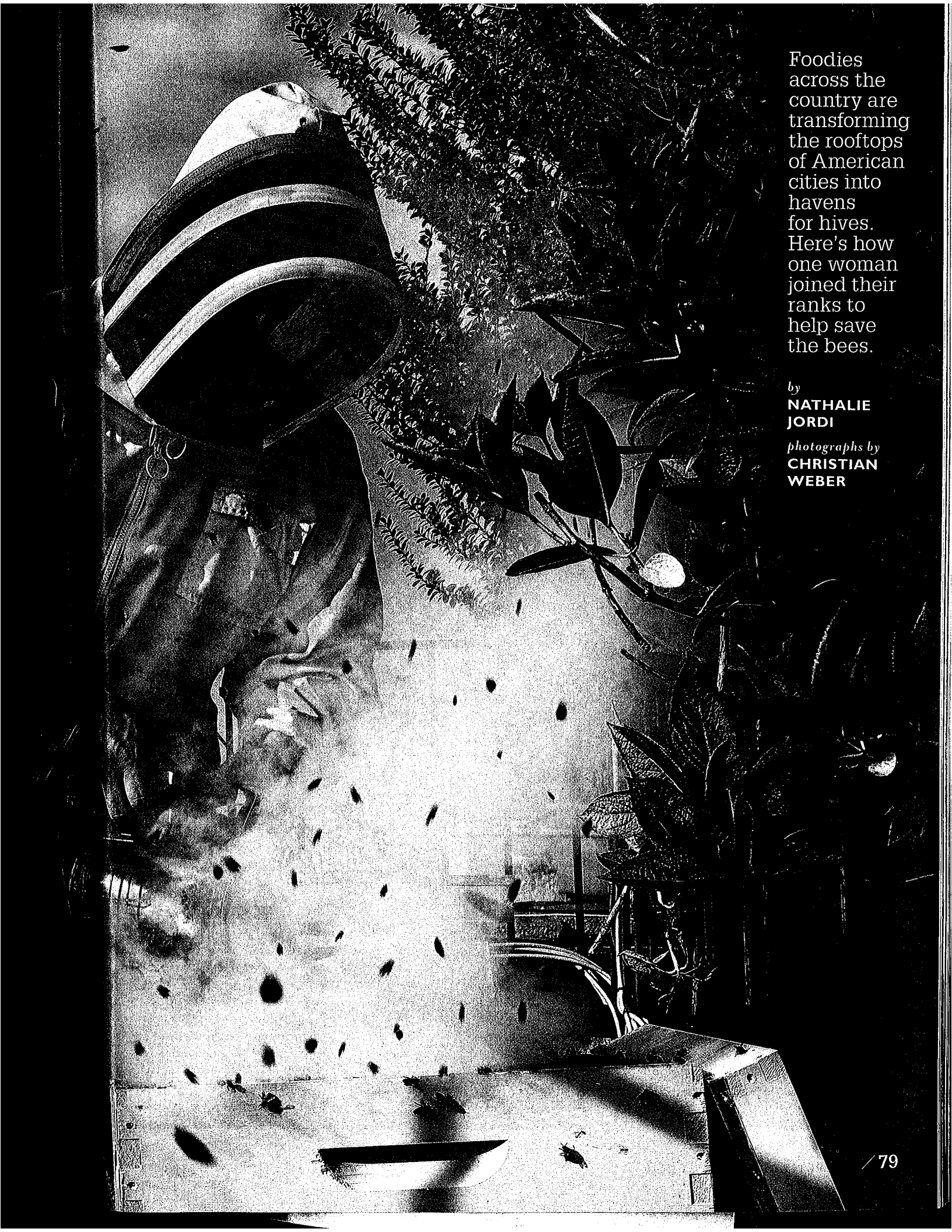
TALES OF AN URBAN BEEKEEPER



VETERAN BEEKEEPER ANDREW COTÉ MAINTAINS A NEW YORK CITY ROOFTOP HIVE.



Foodies across the country are transforming the rooftops of American cities into havens for hives. Here's how one woman joined their ranks to help save the bees.

by
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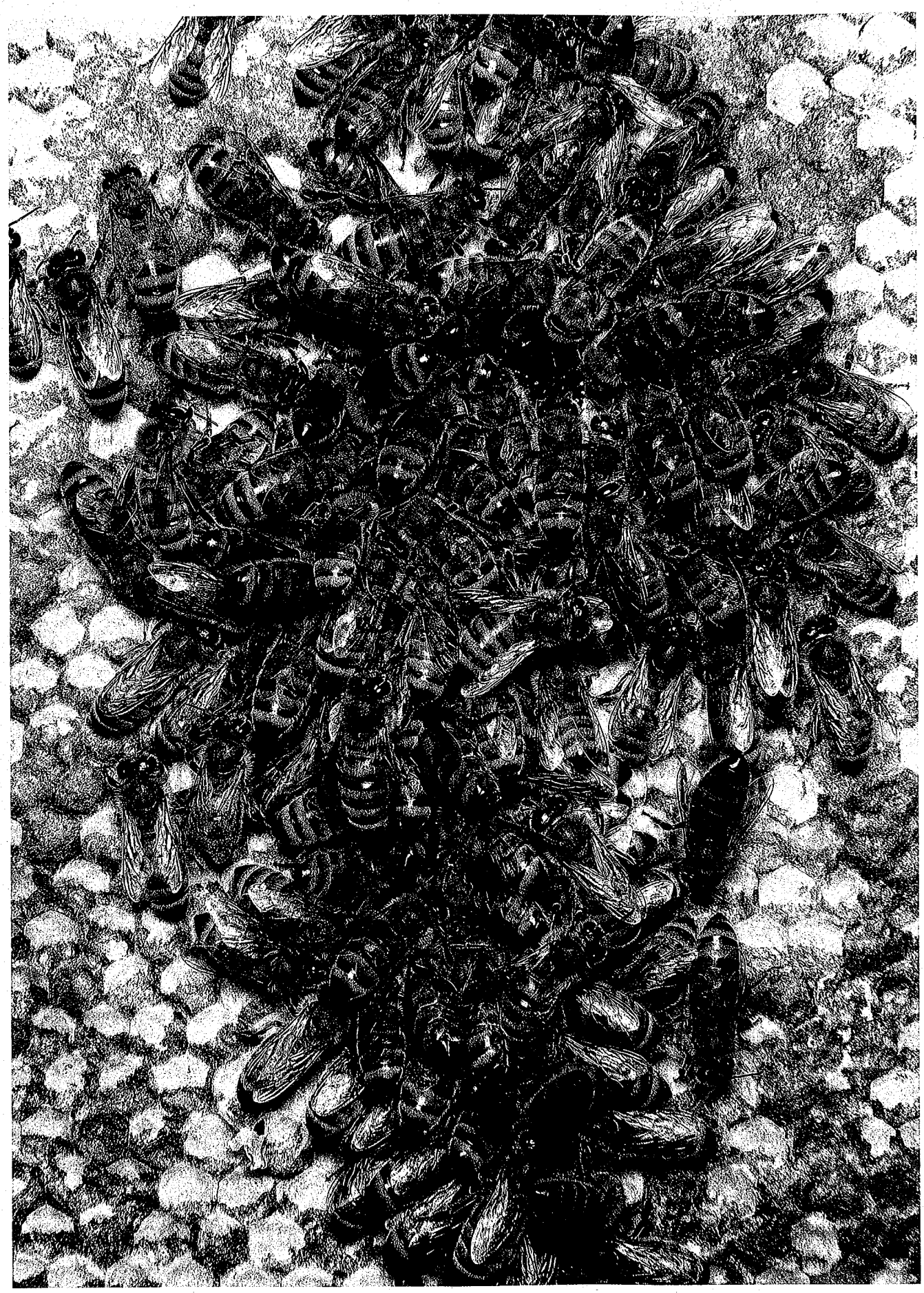

■ **OPPOSITE:** HONEYBEES (*APIS MELLIFERA*) MIGHT FLY 50,000 MILES TO MAKE A SINGLE POUND OF HONEY.

WHEN IT'S SPRING and you want to produce your own honey by midsummer, what you want is a "package." It weighs three pounds, contains approximately 12,000 bees, hums loudly at what musicians allege to be C-sharp below middle C, and includes a tiny cage that sets apart the queen and a few royal attendants. Packages, believe it or not, can be shipped through the U.S. Postal Service.

You know that old saw that compares New York City to a beehive? Frankly, it's an insult to bees. This mischaracterization became painfully clear last summer when I had a mind to put a beehive on the roof of my Manhattan apartment building. After a month's worth of delicate negotiations among my landlords, a local beekeeper named Andrew Coté, and this magazine, a deal was cut. Andrew looks after 42 hives in New York City and another 200 in upstate New York and Connecticut, and runs Bees without Borders, a nonprofit that brings beekeeping know-how to impoverished places like the Niger Delta, Iraq, and Moldova. He had kindly agreed to bring these same skills to my somewhat less impoverished corner of lower Manhattan, so one day he showed up at my door with a big white wooden box from which emanated a buzzing that someone particularly alert of ear might have recognized as C-sharp below middle C: the sound of 12,000 pent-up bees. We shanghaied a stranger off the street into helping us lug it up the wrought-iron fire escape clinging perilously to my apartment building. I thought we had triumphed over the hardest part of the process. The stranger, a Spanish tourist, thought we were absolutely nuts. "Bees? In Mang-hattan?"

You bet, señor. During my summer as an urban beekeeper, I discovered beehives everywhere, from the Bronx to the suburbs. There were some surreptitiously hidden at the back of an East Village community garden, one in Chinatown camouflaged as a chimney, and another fertilizing a massive 6,000-square-foot garden on the rooftop of an old industrial warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. The city was rife with renegade beekeepers.

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ONCE DUMPED INTO A HIVE, the bees instinctively get right to business. The queen's attendants chew through her prison bars and the queen goes straight to laying once the worker bees have built comb. The nurse bees feed the young, squirting royal jelly from glands in their heads. Foragers fly off to suck the nectar from awaiting flowers, pollinating buckwheat or almonds or apples as they go, bringing the spoils back to the hive. There, they pour the nectar into the waiting mouths of the worker bees, who scurry to an empty set of wax cells and work in teams to pump the nectar in and out, at once digesting and dehydrating it. As they fan their wings to evaporate further moisture, the nectar reduces by 80 percent and alchemizes, most mystifyingly, into nature's perfect product: honey. This ultra-compact nutritional powerhouse is said to be the only food capable of passing straight into the bloodstream without requiring digestion. It functions as antiseptic, burn remedy, relaxant, antioxidant, cupboard staple, even embalming fluid, and keeps indefinitely: Honey discovered in Tutankhamun's tomb was still edible 3,200 years later.

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SEVERAL DAYS AFTER WE HAD INSTALLED THE BEES on the roof, another tenant in my building contacted me, irate. He had a flying-insect phobia, a baby, and a law degree. Did I know that keeping bees in New York City was an illegal activity? I did, although I also knew that wheels were in motion to make beekeeping in New York as legal as it was in Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, and a number of other clever American cities (beekeeping was eventually legalized in New York City in March 2010). Did he know, I countered, that more people have allergies to peanuts than to bees? That bees, which pollinate more than a quarter of the plants we use for food, are in dire straits after the devastating one-two punch dealt first by the varroa mite, a pest whose thirst for bee blood put one-quarter of America's professional beekeepers out of business in the 1990s, followed by colony collapse disorder, a disease of mysterious provenance that in 2007–2008 contributed to an astonishing loss of 36 percent of the country's colonies, an estimated 30 billion bees? Had he, by any chance, noticed the 37 percent hike in global food prices during that time? Did he know that small-scale beekeeping is the best way to ensure a healthy, diversified, productive bee population—and, for that matter, planet—as well as the future of the human race itself?

He didn't. And he didn't care. My neighbor was adamant: The hive absolutely had to move. I called Andrew, a man who is, at the best of times, hot-tempered and bloody-minded. "Absolutely not!" he said, more colorfully than that. "The bees have gotten used to their location; move them and they'll die." Great. In signing up for honey, I hadn't noticed the fine print about the potential 12,000 bee deaths on my increasingly troubled conscience.

I called my neighbor Medi, who superintends the Uranian Phalanstery-First Gnostic Lyceum Temple of New York, the mysterious, broken-down manse next door that leaks a perplexing purple light and, at odd hours, discreetly