

BELLADONNA* PROSE EVENT



BELLADONNA* COLLABORATIVE

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(a poem-essay, or
precursor: NOTES:
for a novel: *Ban en Banlieues*)

Bhanu Kapil

*deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries

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Nude pages, smudged, have appeared or are forthcoming in 1913, *Esque*, and *Titmouse Magazine*. The notes as they are, above, appeared in *P-queue*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *Everyday Genius*.

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Belladonna* is an event and publication series that promotes the work of women writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable, dangerous with language.

The 2011 Belladonna* Chaplet Series is designed by Bill Mazza.

Chaplets are \$4 (\$6 signed) in stores or at events, \$7 (\$9 signed) for libraries/institutions.

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mum fed them curried okra and rice, with yoghurt and lime pickle, and later, toast. Nobody came to look for them, and they themselves could not recall being parented or even what lay beyond that field. It was getting late, so my mum gave them a towel to wash their faces and hands with. When they were clean, we showed them to a makeshift bed beneath the dining room table. But in the morning they were gone. They were cute.

****A door you can't go back through.

*****As the event unfolds both after and before. As the text of a present moves so rapidly it cannot be written. This is why immigrants don't write many novels; only emigrants do. I write to you at night, for example, when even my body is hidden from view.

NUDE PAGE FOR BAN

I attach: a nude page for Ban. I did not know how to scan in the page and send it to you. You had said I could send you something in a note form. The page, as you will see, is empty. The page at home is the same, but smudged. I have theorized "Ban" — the entity or girl around whom — I am making a book (*Ban en Banlieues*) as a warp of black smoke. A puff of diesel. Something like a smudge, already dispersing. A warp of smoke looping around the orbital road surrounding London. So, the page I have in front of me is this page but with some soot, taken from the car exhaust pipe and smeared on the page.

Could I ask you, or someone else you know, who does not mind getting dirty, to take some charcoal and soot and, casually, smudge the page — and this be my page to submit?

Because nude pages are smudged. Prehensile. Dirty. A way to predict writing but not writing itself.

BAN DREAMS OF BEING EATEN ALIVE BY WOLVES

1.

Ban dreams of being eaten alive by wolves. Ban has tickets from the West End, and playbills, that will surely be worth something some day. Are those two words? Someday. Tucked into a suitcase. Or sent in a crate. This pure banality, the sending of household supplies by freight, is an emigrant act. A form of nudity. And not a novel-length account.

2.

Notes. With some anger, the kind that builds up over years, in the absence of social services, I write sentences for days. Day three, day four, day nine. Days you never see, chucking back your Bombay Sapphire gin on the patio. Define patio. You could be naked out back and no one would see. Nobody. Where the two vowels ooze geneticity. Or display it. Just as the body without clothes on is analogous to a race mark. I asked my 9-year-old son why he wore his T-shirt to the outdoor pool. He said: “Mom, I think there might be some racists here.” I wanted to tell him: “Honey. Honey....”

3.

Ban is lying in the dirt, all sticky from her ice.

Ban is alone in a café as an adult, dispersing the gazes of others with nothing more than a pen and cup of coffee. She’s in India. Always India, where café culture varies, region by region, to be almost non-existent. In the part she is from. Where she is. In a Sector 17 café. Writing in a place where everyone else is eating a quick breakfast. Like a tourist or office worker. Or the boss,

been born in 1958 not 1968. At least then I would have existed as a figure in an epic narrative. As it is, I hold the book open with the heel of my left fist and write with the other, gripping the pen like an animal**. At this late stage, I’m writing about a person’s attempt to maintain a level of psychic intensity at all costs.

Another bad line. Somebody give her a cup to drink out of. Somebody give her a bowl. Hospital images are psychotic images. They bring forward the simple memories but the memories turn out to be chrysalis. The pale pink membrane tears to reveal a full-grown man standing on a porch with his shirt unbuttoned, the fabric billowing in the breeze. He’s super angry. He’s quick to take her arm*, to catch her hand.

.....
*As a teenager, I was a Kundera fan. I analyzed his novels and saw that each of his first and third chapters opened with a gesture: the head turned over the left shoulder as the doctor walks past the swimming pool; the woman raising her arm to touch the rigid brim of her bowler hat in the oval mirror.

**Feral events cut through. That is why I am obsessed by them. They traverse public histories in a single line. They chart what remains undomesticated not as problems, but desires. How did the virus enter the human bloodstream for the first time? That’s not desire, that’s eating. That’s eating something or touching something with eczematous skin.

***Subtle race pride — eye-rolling when the woman in the fuchsia pink and chocolate silk sari entered the Wimpy Bar — and so on, was found to be a trigger for schizophrenia that far exceeded the actual stressor of migration. We knew that in our bones yet when we found Butch and Sarah, two bedraggled English girls — one thin and one fat — abandoned beneath a bush next to the Churchfield Gardens, we took them home. My

detached houses behind the botanical garden, it's understandable. The person was born in Hayes eight years before the race riots of 1976, which were subdued. A violence like snowflakes from under the bed, three maroon silk-covered duvets padding the space from the legs to the floor, though it never snows in England. Though it does now.

A fragment with its sticky edges rotating in a wet, dark space. That's a snowflake if you ask me. You asking me? Then use your mouth properly. Speak properly.

But that is a schizophrenic sentence, and only of the ordinary sort. The "let's smoke a cigarette in Nantes at Christmas" sort. In Nantes, there is an exhibit. I go to the exhibit two years too late. In fact, there's an exhibition of the drawings of Lucio Fontana in the back room of the gallery, next to the empty fountain, which figures. A fountain is a portal. A fountain is regret. I look at each print, waiting for the diagonal mark on the page, but it doesn't come. Stupid me. I'm like a person waiting next to a fountain that's under construction for a lover who arrives, but is stupid. Is stupid to why we're here, meeting after all these years in a country that's full of white people, all at once, irregardless of the suburbs. Do you come from a suburb? I come from a ditch.

I wrote schizophrenic sentence after schizophrenic sentence until I reached the archae***** sentence, both after and before. I wrote on a map littered with silver triangles and citron-yellow squares, which was not convenient but it was better than not writing anything at all. Nevertheless, someone ought to take that map away from the cartographer***** and feed him some breakfast instead. He's so thin. He's so ill-looking. Give him some eggs. Give him some cold juice.

I want some juice, but I'm not so lucky. The store's all out. Back at home, tired out from the walk in the snow, I am writing about disease processes about fifty years too late; in fact, I wish I had

taking his time and even smoking, smoking a rolled-up cigarette as he drinks his chai, staring hard at Ban when she stops writing. "Yes, ma'am. Cold coffee?" Ban licks the foam off her spoon then bends her head to the page again.

But what is she writing? In my own way, from this wet perch, one foot chained to the cage, I am staring too. A parrot. An intelligent but risk-free bird, pecking at her words. In times of great freedom, when the writing comes, I fly back to my own writing with what she knows. This is another reason not to write novels. Or read.

4.

I don't want to have sex ever again in my life. I don't want it if it means partnering with a white man. A man who takes your polka-dotted dress from you and puts it on. Or leaves it on the brown plastic tray with the remnants of breakfast, outside the door, for a late morning clean-up. Why, in fact, would anyone disrobe with such casual proficiency, then lie down like that, with their legs and arms in the air? Like a baby? Why would a person get naked for a person with whom you do not share culture? (Ban).

5.

But if Ban is a fundamentalist, if Ban converts, at some point, to the radical ideal of the body as somehow untouchable, the very thing you cannot reach, then at some point, she'll have to take off her kit.

6.

Sometimes I see Ban in the dirt of the place she is from.

Ban lying down on a sidewalk in London.

Without resistance. Beneath the ivy. At night.

Like bones before they are bones. Like eyes in the time that follows talking.

WHAT IS A SENTENCE FOR?

I wrote these notes not to be included in a book but because of it and because I don't exist beyond them. If it's love that links you to the earth, then I am writing these dull notes on a cloud. Give me another sip of that baby. Give me another slug of that leg. Writing these sentences on an aeroplane, I... well, I'm wearing my very best sky-diving outfit: a negligee from Loughborough. I bought it on Ashby Street about a million years ago. Far above England, Wales, and then the sea, as we head towards Newfoundland on a sub-volcano swerve: I think about schizophrenia and make the race connection. Cos it's easy, and at this point well known. But you might not know it. And I didn't know it at the time.

Schizophrenia is happening in another place. My confidence faltered, but eventually, I wrote it, *Schizophrenia*, though these, below, I retained, for Ban:

A pseudonym, a stupid fragment. Mint tea. I don't write for you, you write for me.

That is a schizophrenic sentence.

I hate white people.***

That is another sentence.

I hate white people in groups.

That is definitely borderline schizophrenic, but as the person was born in Hayes, on the west part of town, in the complex of semi-

thirty-seven but I look like I'm thirty, don't I? I have to show my ID every time I buy alcohol." And then: "Here's what you'll see. About twenty per cent of the females will be uber-pregnant. The thighs, lard ass." In time, I understand that they are discussing an up-coming high school reunion. "They'll be pregnant," says the second woman, "And fat. Unattractively fat."

Perhaps, I think, I'll set the bulk of my book in Haberdasher's Aske's School for Girls.

Perhaps Ban will be dark, but also crystalline, like a high-school vampire. Like blending something in a pan.

The paper that lines the pan.

For cookies.

"I hate cookies almost as much as I hate white people."

Says Ban, to begin.

To write a sentence with content more volatile than what contains it.

So that the page is shiny, wet and hard.

So that sentences are indents not records; the soulful presence of a vibrant man or girl rather than persistence.

Their capacity to touch you in the present time.

NOTES FOR BAN: an infantile bank.

1.

Or diptych. A presentation, pre-soaked. Quiet. It's so quiet before a book begins.

So quiet that when my nervous system hurts, so does the sentence, because that's all we have: each other. The sentence and I. We cope.

Met Andrew W. at Coda and after we'd settled down with our millet scones and tea, we made a pact to meet in Colorado, or virtually, a year from now, with novels. Novels set in the UK and that we have not written yet. Why? Some ideas: "Lazy." "Time." Andrew makes a list and when we part, I tuck it in my bag, which rips where the arm of it, the strap, meets the red cloth of the torso. Who wants to pay through the nose for new accommodations? Not I.

This is a bank for sentences. All the tellers are out to lunch. Customers purge on Newsweeks and cappuccinos in a central lobby designed so poorly that sometimes, before the agent returns, they leave. Some places, like the sloping bar-stool seats McDonalds pioneered in the late 1980s, eject you from your childhood position.

Anything but talk about Ban. I would talk about pedophilia before I talked about Ban. Her left leg or arm. As a child, I lay down on the bed like a sentence not written yet. Out came a pen. Out came paper. I have a memory of the paper slipping under my hips, for example.

To historicize a somatics is to have a memory of public events

that supersedes, perhaps, the grid of touch. Flowers, electricity, and even herbs. I place them in a vase. I flip the switch. A foreign body is a frequency. It's a body flaring with violet light when you look away from the sheet and its matching pillow. These are notes, so I don't have to go there. I don't have to lie down with you. And I don't.

Just as I never write.

Just as I prevent myself from writing at all costs.

Just as I do not love.

Just as I substitute fiction for prose, and prose for the sentences that, like animals.

Like schizophrenics.

Like wolves.

Emit light. Perceptible to the ones who also. Lie down on the ground. Lie down on the ground like that.

I think of a person I loved between the years 2004 and 2007, which were not years. They were hours. "Little hours," as Andrew called them in Coda, a word that bears repeating. I think of how I lay down on the ground for him, thinking he would come, with coffee, and a blanket, but how, when morning came, I had frozen into a new position.

On a bank, where the stems transplant themselves upon our skin. Because we're dead. We lay down on the riverbank and never got up again. Our [*****] turned into red flowers that flared then rotted away, in the banal image of the body's reproductive system appearing outside it, as a gent. The yellow stamen that stabilized the parts of the page that looked boring, when we glanced down at the page, just lying there, with its legs open.

2.

A book of time, for time and because of it.

A book for recovery from an illness. A book that repeats a sentence until that sentence recuperates its power to attract, or touch, other sentences.

A book as much poetry as it is a forbidden or unfunded area of research. The first thing to go when the bank fails. When the bank manager books his vacation to Costa Rica and blanks it out. His commitment. The strength of the British pound. An attendant menagerie of quotients, HR tips, and downtown rent.

I think of Rouault, who burned his paintings "due to criticism." I think of Barbara, who went to the Art Institute of Chicago sixty years ago. She's eighty, I think. Her husband has dementia. He's an alcoholic, in fact, and we're meeting about that. We're meeting in a room. Barbara and I annoy the group when we veer off into conversations about art. Barbara says: "I painted rocks at the Art Institute." She says: "Sometimes I can't draw but I get some nice lines." I invite her to my house and somehow she drives from Fort Collins, shaking like a leaf on its stem. It's Barbara who tells me about Rouault, and about her marriage, which dominated this other part of life. Its feathers. Feral moments so valuable you never share them with anyone else.

Like finances.

Like the writings of Melanie Klein. They are a deep orange with a cream border and though I don't open the book, I keep it next to me as I write.

I go to the café to write, but am boxed in by two women close to my age. A bit younger or older. I can't tell. The first one says: "He makes me feel like I'm smart and uber-attractive. Sure, I'm