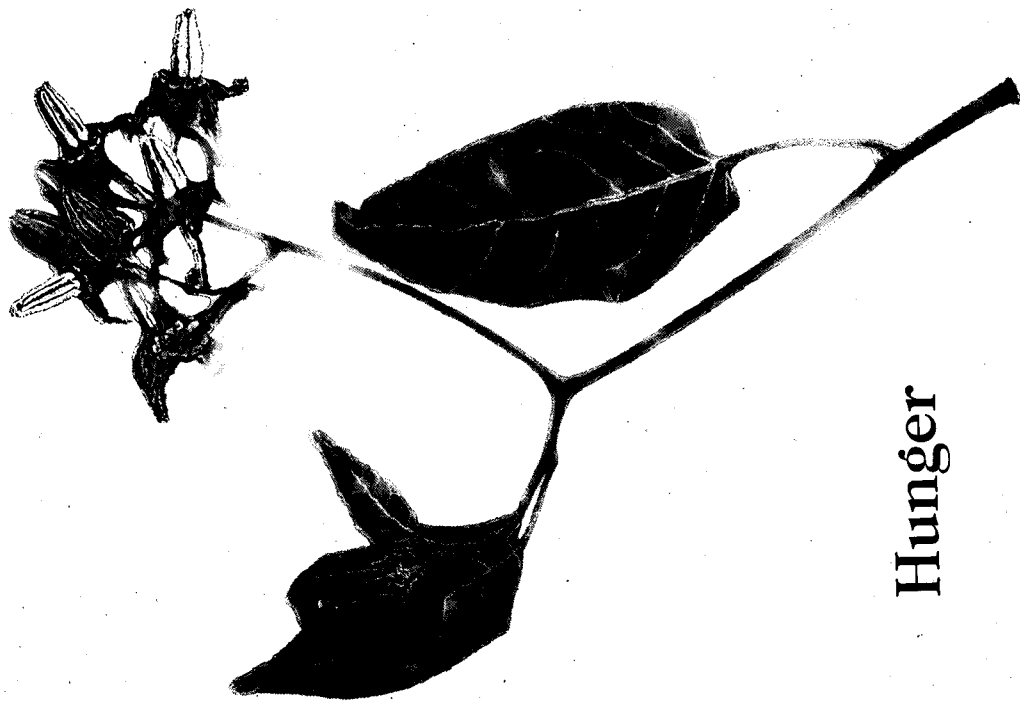


#135

2011

BELLADONNA * *

BELLADONNA * CHAPLET SERIES



Hunger

by
Amina Cain



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

Hunger

Amina Cain

LATELY I'VE BEEN having a hard time knowing what's good. I don't even know how to write. Maybe I am only a reader. I try to force things, force stories. I have to work on a story for many, many months before it makes sense.

Still, someone gave me the opportunity to copy a piece of writing onto the wall of a gallery. I'd never done anything like that before. I called it a hunger text, because it was about a woman who didn't have enough money for food. On the day I painted my hunger text on the wall, I wore an old-fashioned lace shirt that had once belonged to my aunt. I also wore a long wool skirt. The text was projected onto the wall, and I painted on top of it. I found it both relaxing and exhausting to do this all day.

I will write about this experience, I thought. Now I am writing about it, but I'm not sure what there is to say, and whether or not saying it will be interesting for anyone to hear or read. I felt comfortable painting the text while wearing the old-fashioned shirt and the skirt. I wanted to make a costume for myself, even though I wear this costume at other moments too, like when I go to the grocery store, or to a restaurant. Maybe I wanted to be another kind of writer, one who performs putting her text on a wall, as if it would be fun for someone else to see me do this.

Now she is painting an 'N' on the wall, and now an 'e.' Now I have painted the word 'foot.' And now 'pleasure.' The woman in the text is projected onto the wall too, limping across letters, eating bugs. Can you see her? What am I doing there, leaning across her, leaning across those letters, while standing on a ladder, with the text projected on my back, and my arms, as my shirt is white, and see-through, and when I am there the woman is on my back and arms as much as she is on the wall.

Here, I have put a hungry, 'abject' woman on the wall for you to ponder; a woman who still feels pleasure. If you read part of this text, you'll only know a little about her. If you read all of this text, you'll still only know a little about her.

I walked across the floor of the gallery, dragging my foot. No one else was in the room; this part of the performance was only for me. This must have been more interesting than seeing me paint letters on a wall. Watching me paint letters would only be interesting for someone who has some special attraction to me. I suppose if I were attracted to a person I could watch him or her paint letters on a wall all day, or at least for a part of an afternoon. I am in a relationship, but I am sure the person I am in a relationship with would be bored by having to watch me paint letters on a wall for more than ten minutes. This is understandable. But it felt good, the dragging of the foot, and I liked doing it.

When I got home, my partner was eating an egg. This is what he does when I'm not around. He also eats fish. I was harsh to him,

but without speaking. I expressed myself through the violent putting away of a pan. Later I sat on his lap and dreamed about the future. This was together alone.

In our reveries, we both forgot the other was there. I was very far away. I was thinking about how dark it was getting outside, but I clung to his neck, which must have meant that I was also very much in the room. When I told him what I had been thinking about, he didn't believe me. "How could you look so far away and be thinking about something so mundane?"

"But darkness is never mundane."

"I need to work now," he said gently, nudging me off his lap.

I wanted to wash my face and my feet. I wanted to be invited somewhere.

"This is evil," I said out loud.

The days went by and I occupied myself with reading and writing and lying around on the porch. In my mind I was very close to the days before when I had written my hunger text on a wall. Every moment felt charged with a thing that had just happened, or a thing that would happen once something else had ended. Lying around on a porch sounds lazy, but it doesn't have to be. It depends on how you feel about it. Because my wrists hurt, I was still charged with the copying of my piece of literature.

Finally I did start to feel lazy, so I walked a few miles along a surprisingly empty road to a university library, though I have no affiliation to the university.

I collected the books I wanted to read, and then found a comfortable place to sit, so I could read them. This place happened to be next to an elevator, but that's not what made it comfortable.

"I want to see myself here," I said out loud.

The woman in the chair next to me jerked her head around.

"This is a library," she said incredulously.

"I know. That's why I said it."

"Look in a window. At your reflection."

"I don't do that anymore."

"Study your arm."

"You don't understand what I'm talking about."

The woman stared at a row of books for a few minutes.

They were hardbacks. Then she got up to watch a documentary about a writer. I could see the screen, but I couldn't hear anything. The woman was wearing headphones.

I will force this into a story, I thought. I got cold when I thought this. I started shivering. I was in a place where I couldn't control the temperature, which made me upset. I wanted to be comfortable so I could focus.

I moved into a sunnier part of the library and continued reading. Right away I was able to see the specter of the story. Now I am moving through literature, I thought. I would like to move through something abject. Like when you touch something warm and you get warmer. But, I am abject myself. I don't need to touch another to feel this way. I possess it inside, like a little clamshell.

I was tempted to move in a way that would make the others in the library think of me strangely, the way I had moved when I was in the gallery.

I looked at my hand. How can I re-imagine you?

This can not be a portrait. The page is the size of a mirror, but that doesn't mean anything. Once I looked at my arm and wanted to write about that. Write about the arm when the whole body is being abused.

Tonight, the night I am writing this, I am sick and tender. My body is warm and it hurts my throat to swallow.

Not knowing what is good for anyone, I start writing.

I want to make another costume for myself. I want to perform another thing on a wall, like truth, but I don't know what truth looks like—I've haven't experienced it yet.

I remember a moment in winter when snow was stuck to the grass, intimately. One light thing moved through something that was solid, darker. In that moment, someone had asked me to help host a festival of literature.

"Yes," I had said.

"It will be about memory."

I was admiring what was underfoot.

Thank you to Jen Karmin for inspiring me to think about installation as performance, and to Renee Gladman and Lydia Davis for the ways in which their work has inspired me to think about a text as a performance too.

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