

belladonna* Catalog

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#43

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One: I Beg You, Be Still

from *Was. Or Am.*

by
Summi Kaipa



belladonna*books

458 Lincoln Place, Suite 4B Brooklyn, NY 11238
www.durationpress.com/belladonna

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



“One: I Beg You, Be Still” from *Was. Or Am.* © Summi Kaipa 2003
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multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable,
dangerous with language.

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“One: I Beg You, Be Still”

**by
Summi Kaipa**

“I’m really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.”

– Meera Syal, *Anita and Me*

As I look beyond myself, past the row of tall, colorful houses which butt against one another, barely allowing the moon, a freshly bitten fingernail, to come through. Following it through the small spaces, I lose it in a cluster of trees. On the orange and white bus which I ride every Friday and recognize no one but the bus driver, my gaze lands once on a bag of French fries left behind. The smell of grease wafts and then dissipates. A neighbor begrudgingly cracks a window. My gaze lands on a magazine, on a billboard, on the perfectly painted lips of a twenty-something who reaches into her purse for a piece of gum.

I was frightened of what would happen next, when Draupadi is dragged into the public forum to be ravaged. But surprisingly, in this PG version, we won't see it. We will only know, later, when the story is resurrected after the fact, that Draupadi is enraged by how she has been treated. Not witnessing the rape, we will wonder why she is overreacting over a bit of teasing.

A car outside the Cognitive Dissidents Clinic plays Bob Dylan almost out of earshot though it's easy to fill in the chorus:

"How does it feel? To be on your own? Like a complete unknown? Like a rolling stone?"

At the very moment that the camera zooms in on the dice, a pigeon lands on Draupadi's cheeks. A Bollywood "dishkum, dishkum" noise melodramatically punctuates the simultaneity. She is startled from her sleep, shooing the fat bird from her face in a panic. She has not yet noticed the permanence of this incident.

The moon, I assure you, is going places. Its wax and wane.

"Moon! Moon!"

A four-year old waves at the sky. She then looks intermittently at the horizon. "Sunset!" she shouts. Evidence that things are encouragingly shifting from mutually exclusive to co-existent. In general, I have decided to stop watching the moon, though I still succumb to looking up to where the child points. I admit I am obsessed and possessed by the forces (the burden) of beauty in this world. The moon only eggs me on, furthering the idea that such beauty can exist. The perfection a circle, a proportion whose pattern could flower outward infinitely. Its wax and wane.

It was disappointing to put a dollar into the jukebox at Casanova, request “Qurbani,” and have it never come on. I complained to the bartender in the middle of happy hour, but he was wholly uninterested in my problem. “No guarantees with the jukebox,” he grumbled. What he didn’t realize is that I needed such an interruption to re-invigorate my sense of self.

The lack of “Qurbani” in the bar invoked the greater question: Is the interruption of song and dance in the middle of a narrative sequence too disruptive? Melodramatic to the point of discounting the validity of the original narrative?

I have found myself saying, just today, that I admire the way *Monsoon Wedding* incorporates the culture of music into the Indian tale, circumventing the genre of the musical, by including singing and dancing as part and parcel of the narrative. The story itself is never surpassed by clichéd scenes of women in white saris swinging from tree to tree in the rain, their pallus melodramatically blowing in the wind. Rather, the immediate *santhoshum* of the moment moves us. We play ourselves as ourselves enjoying music, inspired by nostalgia, by the others singing around us.

But then, hasn’t Lars Von Trier succeeded in doing the exact opposite of what I have just applauded? Does genre in *Dancer in the Dark*, with the edifice of the musical more overtly apparent and functioning ironically, allow us to extract more truth from the universe?

Once unearched from behind a mountain, the moonlight helped us through our night ascent on a three-foot wide path, with a deep ravine on my right and the embankment on my left. My eyes would adjust to the light which, though two days waning, was still very bright. I didn’t trust it enough to illuminate the trail truthfully, and kept turning on my flashlight. But I only thwarted myself, the artificial light tripping me up, dilating and contracting my pupils, testing my faith in the moon and my own instincts.

“Why I failed” as though the asymptotic nature of failure is inherent to our journey.

Is it too difficult to imagine that a woman, swimming in a stream of moonshine, can guide herself alone?

Several panoramic shots of the casino, intercut by a few slow motion shots of the men at the table shaking the dice. The audience is restless. The movie-goers, who have all paid \$10 to see the overly-hyped flick at the Metreon in San Francisco, are on the edge of their seats with anticipation. Edit in another shot of the daydream: Draupadi's mother slowly releasing her daughter's plait. It comes undone like competing currents of a river, crossing and uncrossing upon itself. The characteristically melodramatic soundtrack of "Carmina Burana" as it grows in decibels. The eventful slow—nothing like the actual swiftness of a Vegas loss—reaches the climactic, shows the dice to be imminent. A hush falls over the crowd.

This becomes the year's biggest hit—a Coppola follow-up to *The Godfather* trilogy—and sells out at the box office.

Thus, I began my search for the perfect balance between Bollywood and Hollywood, the subaltern and the subversive punk rock, the popular and the private.

This dramatic version is not so different from the rest. In the gambling room, the furnishings reek of spoiled royalty. Gold and silver cloths dress the windows. The plush seating is made of silk saris with large geri borders torn and re-sewn into lounging pillows, like a Middle Eastern harem's palace. Ironically, there are no women here. Only the men are planted firmly around the green felt billiards table. Dice sit pathetically unreal like toys won in an arcade and meant to be hung playfully from a rearview mirror.

There have never, in this narrative, been any mothers or sisters or daughters threaded, autonomously, into the nervous nation's fate. There is no story for Draupadi's absence, for her presence elsewhere. Only after her vulnerable body is later used as an excuse for revenge does her role matter. Even so, she is the storyteller's pawn—an excuse to reinforce whose side we must take.

It had already been a long time since I had finished the Most Embarrassing Era of My Life, but I was still trying to address the things that had gotten affected in the process.

For example, I was actively purging my underwear, assessing which unlucky pairs I had worn when witnessing _____ catastrophe. They were filled with the aura of failure, and, thus, I gave gifts to the trash.

But with other earthly possessions, it was not the same. It seemed crucial for me to recognize and keep all things which I deemed quintessentially my own—which in all instances would be representative of me. I wasn't able to part with one of my silver necklaces even though it was associated with a specifically unbearable period. This particular necklace looked like a set of Christmas lights adorning the neck like a tree decorated by my mother in our winter yard, my father accusing her of being more "Christian" than our neighbors.

No matter how cumbersome the tale which accompanied my pieces of jewelry, I just couldn't throw them away. I also wasn't able to ditch my accumulated thoughts and explanations on cultural identity—ways that it was defined through the intersections of memories, self-analysis, willed histories, and cultivated images. Admittedly, it all needed restructuring. As the reader will later learn, there were certain obsessions and, then, there were *obsessions*. I had enrolled my thesis, which was not at all academic in nature but which was perfectly described by the metaphor of the Christmas lights with its alternating increments of light and dark, into the Cognitive Dissidents Clinic for general spiritual mending.

I was hoping to learn the difference between truth and beauty. And a lot of other things, for that matter.

In transit, catching small fragments of conversations, the cross-generational masses have been employing the phrase, "she is searching for herself." As if to illustrate some awkward interim. Edges that have not yet become polished. Not yet poised with a programmatic self-restraint expected of a woman.

But when I arrived home, laid down in my bed looking up at a photograph of a train station in Madras that I have pinned to my ceiling—

I don't think we are searching for ourselves. We are constantly being sought out. Unallowed to be ourselves. Constantly exposed for whatever other purpose. Dragged into the streets as martyr, as witch, as slut.

Liz Waldner writes, "Ok, ok, I ask you. Is it not like the streets? If more women went out at night, it would be safer for women to go out at night. (If no men went out at night, it would be safer for women to go out at night. Argument ad hominem ad hominem.)"

In this story, there are characters, who are following the path given to them, who are led unconsciously astray by adornment, or who are, thirdly, happy to be kidnapped beyond their own myopia.

"He questioned softly why I failed?"

Like the stars in the sky. It's difficult to mimic such a simple temptress.

The men have already wagered and lost their luxury cars, their diamond rings, their beach resorts in the Hamptons. What fortune has brought them to this table—to have had these possessions and to know the swiftness of loss? A cupped hand under a faucet inevitably leaks all water. All droplets quickly fall away and disappear.

Dharmaraja, an unshaven drunk who naively believes he can win the rigged game, thinks of the last thing he has. Scenes of Draupadi flash quickly, MTV-style on the screen. When she came home from last year's Diwali party, wearing a red Benares silk sari, she unwrapped the pallu, revealing her midriff—her enrapturing belly like that of his favorite childhood movie star Sri Devi. He stood there, unabashedly voyeuristic, and watched her undress.

The Caesar's Palace waitresses, in scanty togas, purposefully offering cleavage as a place to tip, smile and ask him if he'd like another drink. His speech already slurred, he orders the colonial beverage. "A gin and tonic, please."

Before he is stripped of the clothes he is wearing, he wonders about the moon and looks toward the entrance doors of the casino. He is reminded that it's still light out, of how his wife is napping upstairs.

Here is the side narrative.

Draupadi is in a hotel room upstairs, eyes closed, between exhaustion and nap. Daydreaming, she recalls the pre-adolescence, how it was before she got her period, when she played freely in the park with the young neighborhood boys. Before the subsequent seclusion to womanhood. They climbed the monkey bars, made mud pies, rode bikes through the nearby woods filled with the scent of honeysuckle. When it rained, they'd convene in Draupadi's foyer, adorned in yellow and orange raincoats and galoshes ready to go stomping through puddles, to make little paper boats to race in the flooding gutters around her house.

Dear Reader,

Can you trust this saccharine daydream? Am I, in giving our protagonist such a dream, making her an idyllic heroine, as she will always be figured anyway? Or, can we imagine that the background soundtrack is something confused, the brilliance of which is that it cannot yet understand its own earnestness. Thus, it resurrects the playful truth in a dark comedy.

Something like "Strawberry Fields." Forever.

Catching a 3 o'clock bus from the corner of 16th & Guerrero to California & Clay, I was, once again, transported from the still-present grunge of the Mission—broken beer bottles, stacks of newspapers, flyers advertising a new neighborhood pizza joint—to the already-gentrified, completely transitioned streets of the Fillmore. Where the likes of beauty were potent! Even the most modest window watcher was wooed by Danish modern furniture, faux fur, artful pastries, and pricey curios. Each boutique was an advertising agency, waiting to convince me that I needed a better self-marketing campaign!

Curiously, this confluence of beauty and opulence—the way they seemed horribly intertwined—brought strange behaviors out of me. I walked through the streets, insistently putting my nose to the glass of each storefront. I wanted to belong so badly, but the nose-against-the glass forced a pathetic look of longing into my face, which appeared in the way the lines near my eyes deepened. However, only *I* knew this. With my great poker face, inherited from my grandmother, I was certain no one could sense the projected inadequacy which swelled in me like a fast-approaching high-tide and forced me to leave immediately.

That is a preposterous lie! Because of my doubts about objective and subjective beauty, I calmly willed myself to leave immediately.

When she had returned, alone, her hair smelling of the nearby pond, Draupadi's mother would sing a lullaby:

*Have you played and played and become so tired?
Lie down and take a nap, my beautiful doll.*

As she fell asleep on the living room couch, she felt the warm hands of her mother undoing her braids, running a comb through her thick hair.

The naptime dreams were many and varied. Sometimes about the kind man who she caught whistling in the forest. Or the walk to the drugstore to buy individually wrapped pieces of Laffy Taffy in the sweltering sun, the heat almost burning a hole in the asphalt streets. Or, about a recurring math problem:

If a sari is 6 yards long, and the circumference of a woman's body is 2 feet, how many 360 degree turns before she is fully undressed?

But, before arriving at an exact answer, she would get lost in the image of the sari flowing freely like a flag inhabited by a mythic wind. Some kind of beauty in that.