

# BELLADONNA\* 1

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## *Eating Belief*

*by*

*Mary Burger*

*an excerpt from*

*The Boy Who Could Fly*

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

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Portions of *Eating Belief* have previously appeared at [www.poetryproject.com/burger.html](http://www.poetryproject.com/burger.html)

*Eating Belief* is the foreword from the unpublished manuscript “The Boy Who Could Fly.”

*Eating Belief* is designed and typeset by David A. Kirschenbaum. It is set in FuturTMed 33 pt, Minion BoldCondensed 48 pt, Minion Condensed 10, 12, and 48 pt, and Minion CondensedItalic 10, 12, and 24 pt.

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Belladonna is a reading series at Bluestockings Women’s Bookstore 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.

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Rachel Levitsky, editor Belladonna Books  
David A. Kirschenbaum, editor and publisher

**A** FAMILIAR GEOLOGIC PATTERN; SAY, THE MODERATE GLACIER-CARVED VAL-  
LEYS of a north-central state. Two-lane county roads with  
extra-wide shoulders to accommodate the persistent  
horse-drawn vehicles, black bonnets and trousers and jackets  
and skirts and light-blue shirts and dresses, apple-cheeked  
youngsters with Dutch boy hair, young women with smiles to  
say they are still of marriageable prospects, one-room schools  
that teach the lessons of other years. Language becomes a way  
of stopping time. The *Frakturschrift* of the hinged leather bible  
opened only by the bearded patriarch and never moved from  
shelf to table and back to shelf except by him.

More philosophy than poetry but not a system for thought, not  
thought. It is not a thing you chose, it is not a thing you trace,  
though you map the genealogy of your family, your education,  
your parents' reading and religious habits, the prejudices of the  
institutions that held sway in your formative years, though you  
can see now the intellectual/psychological proclivities of the  
ones who first taught you *language* as an instrument, their vary-  
ing degrees of wonder, adventure, inhibition, aplomb.

It lives with poetry because few but poetry will tolerate it.

An incident of language that brings us to a place of know-  
ing how language works. An ephemeral utterance, a fleeting  
vision, uncommunicated and unrecorded.

A depression can emerge that is not psychological. One can  
weary of ubiquitous significance. One can weary of the obliga-  
tion to respond. One can wish to dodge the hermeneutic and its  
flashing sword.

One can, largely without effort, summon remorse for what was  
lacking, the key stimulation or encouragement that, adminis-  
tered at the right time in the appropriate amount, would have  
prevented the limitations now here, would have unlocked the  
potential now lost, or at any rate gnarled into an insult of its

That is, Alex Cory,  
the Americans are having this response.  
The faith breached by loss of a small artifact  
smaller than a pocket  
cheaper than lunch  
on a cheap, cold overnight train  
where snow dusts the women's backs  
or the babies on their backs  
if they have them,  
where card games last seven hours  
and boiled eggs are bought through the window  
and noodles cook in their own juice,

the faith is breached,  
a shrieking of steel on steel,  
the lurching, lurching, lurching at the end  
which is to say, nowhere,  
the train is always nowhere, the train is all places  
but no particular place  
and when it stops,  
you are there,  
the woman outside the window  
with a large hat, which may be only her hair,  
with a baby, which may be  
only the reason you are there,  
and snow  
and no eggs,  
it's too cold for the rice  
and the mudslides  
which will come later.

The farthest place  
from the farthest place  
and you are there  
in white,  
in a stalled train  
in the air  
and Alex Cory the Americans are breaking their faith  
on a railroad bridge over a ravine  
the arches an open canopy  
over silence and stone and ash

the American leans over the window ledge  
the window ledge cuts him in half

the Americans  
eat soft mouthfuls  
of soil  
and piles of dry ash

carbon monoxide pounds through a gray head  
vomit trickles down a chin

this is your faith  
it isn't true  
it doesn't shine  
it never happened

one paper notebook stole your fate  
cheap pages from a factory that burns soft coal  
it never happened  
pages glued inside a brown cover sheet  
it never happened

in this episode, Abraham, god's angel doesn't spare your son

you cut the throat and savor the quicksilver taste of the blood  
on your knife  
on your tongue

black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown  
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
we drink and we drink it

a six-foot dunce cap splashed in blood  
ludicrous tyranny, happened to anybody

these Americans

having a miracle  
being the multiple.

II.

Small  
head on a shoulder,  
legs wrapped around a waist,  
eyes watch from the sleepy face

all humiliations are public  
all myths  
are smaller than life.

The young parents  
despaired.

Do you want some milk?

No.

Juice?

No.

Yogurt?

Banana?

Carrots?

No.

Do you want to lay on the bed  
while I rub your belly and sing your favorite song.  
Do you want me to tie your shoes  
and we'll watch tv.

Brown suede shoes  
too dressy with his cutoff shorts.

The sun-the water-the sky  
scissors-paper-rock

what he thought about  
drifting momentarily  
above the glittering sea.

All humiliations .

Jumping off the doghouse  
jumping off the toolshed  
jumping off the garage.  
The peaked roof of the house is next  
two and a half stories above the lawn  
level with the tops of trees.  
Tape and sticks and feathers  
snapping and thumping and groans.  
He flew like a bowling pin  
like an ironing board  
like a log.

He flew  
because he knew he couldn't.  
He flew because it wasn't possible.  
And when he didn't die he flew again.

Levi's and a t-shirt on a 10-year-old boy  
Nothing could be more ordinary.

Did you see red t-shirt and dark brown skin?  
White t-shirt and pale skin?

*...the father hovered,  
Poised, in the morning air, and taught his son,  
"I warn you, Icarus, fly a middle course"*

*... and the boy  
Thought, "This is wonderful," and left his father,  
Soared higher, higher  
Nearer the sun, and the wax that held the wings  
Melted in that fierce heat, and the bare arms  
Beat up and down in the air,  
Took hold of nothing. Father! he cried, and Father!  
And Daedalus,*

*Father no more,  
Saw the wings on the waves, and cursed his talents*

a boy and his machine  
a boy eating ice cream  
watching a 40-foot screen.

He was the reason they worked  
or quit working,  
stayed together, moved to the city,  
moved out of the city,  
got a mortgage,  
went to a therapist,  
went to church.  
The reason they gave up smoking, drinking, fighting,  
or casual sex.

They expected as much in return.

Serious, bespectacled.

It was the shape of his small head  
and anything could happen.

a lonely Icarus  
boring his father even  
flapping his sticks and feathers  
leaping from the doghouse to the ground  
whose contraption fails  
another inch of lift  
or a moment of airborne time

the first films of human flight  
as jerky as the dragonfly contrivances  
staggering and collapsing  
under the burden of the dream  
not triumph, but impossibility.

*Ovid's account shows him at his worst,  
sentimental and exclamatory.*

*and he made two pairs of wings for them*

the wonderful power  
went to the boy's head

one if by land,  
one if a face pressed to the window  
one if his body stayed in the chair  
while he sailed over rooftops,  
Chagallian angel

*never forgot his early life  
in an obscure village*

*the terror of war and pogroms  
is suggested by the pitiful figures  
while resignation and hope  
reside with the flying angel*

*common  
to groups of people*

It became easier, then, to describe things  
about which others would say,  
"This happened also to me."

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