

BELLADONNA* 10

Soft Pages
by
Kathleen Fraser

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

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to Peter Weltner

It was that motion of the back foot caught in the photo as a blur, more believable and quickly conveying a person's leaving who had once been on his way, even anticipating this place that continued to re-enter my imagination, as if the black-and-white photo of no one I knew had delivered the plot of a story it wished me to take hold of. This was not about desire or choice—the two preferred categories of explanation for my life, in conscious moments of trying to make sense (or at least an admirable clarity) of things—but about dropping into a place after that. This was not the brass plate special: DESIRE in embossed black capitals, the nameplate attached to the hallway door of apartment number 5...This was before desire, but after CHOICE.

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Voices cutting through the air above the paper passage. Voices one can hear every afternoon at just this hour of 3:40 when certain neighbors, whose doors face via Luigi Santini, rise out of their random snores and leave their rooms for the street and sniff the air like dogs and start barking like dogs, not knowing why they bark except the need to push one's snout at the unnatural silence and move it around. That same moment being the one in which their sharp and muffled barks have pulled me into inexplicable pleasure.

And then a siren goes off as if its car were being broken into.

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Needing something, the cheap lined paper of those little bound notebooks imported from Germany one finds in certain shops in Rome, with cover stock of pseudo-Florentine design, somewhat faded looking, as if a businessman from Lubeck, in love with the expensive papers of Florence, but more than half in love with profit, had finally fixed upon the *lepidoptera* “wing-scales” pattern but had opted for its recycled version in bleached-out, cost-effective blue. I allow for that economy. A more expensive paper would

dazzle you with perfection and inhibit you with its emptiness. I've found also that certain writing implements may make the difference between jumping or falling; the particular receptivity of cheap paper to soft lead or the tip of a rollerball pen can pull one into the page's porous expanse, not exactly sinking into it but not floating above it either, more like losing the sense of confine—con.fi.ne in my quasi-second language—indicating the border between two countries.

I've noticed, too, that the particular angle of my body in a certain rattan chair, purchased in Rome at one of those chain stores owned by a certain disreputable politician recently deposed, allows some entering into the liquid element. Liquidation or sequential randomness. (But I always trusted my dreams and never thought of them as abandoned film clips). One might cast off in classical terms, as in the crossing from land to water, before you've noticed, which would remove an action's intentionality or at least alter it.

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I lift the red panties with satin stripes, earlier tossed on the green radiator along with various pairs of ankle socks, among them the black cotton streaked with yellow and vermilion, still damp from the morning's rain outside in the *cortile*. Touching them. Turning them into their folds and rolling them into neat little bundles for the drawer. Some greyness begins to fall. I can see its motion sideways from the window, the graininess of newsreels from the Second World War, and I know it's more rain. No sound of voices barking, having gone in again. An animal gratitude.

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By realistic representation of the foot—one woman said it was a man's foot in motion—I'm sure of that—one could be helped, technically, into a different century, just as introducing the words "The Peloponnesian Wars" or "World War II" can pull you into a discrete flow of time assigned to a displaced fragment...pelagic, if that's how a particular moment keeps continuing without one being able to stop it, either around you, in the world, or stuck in the on-goingness of your mind in a decade preceding you, you trying to pull away from it or it coming towards you in slow and fast motion.

Even as you walk towards the most simple morning task.

An earlier war could attach itself to the odd assignment of time before now, not yours, called "Turn-of-the-century," as could the spliced image of a centaur attach itself to a monster, the new construct borne into overlay as word, or demonstration of the mind's ability to jump or grasp more than one thing at a time, this horse/man turning away from or leaving us with its (his?) path of motion as inadmissible evidence. But also the blur of discrete categories forced into coupling.

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Today, walking with you, alongside and then across the Circo Massimo at an angle down from the upper track and over the grassy slope to the site of pre-Christian games of prowess and midnight movies in 1983, looking for the odd bit of archeological evidence, finding an almost buried slab of Roman brick underfoot, wanting the smaller scale and ordinary blue of the wild flower next to it. Not as definite as departure. Already it was following the camera's path, its ability to bunch up time, capture it incrementally or smoothly, into successive unfoldings, compression fanning out through heat-laminated brick, golden fade-out into transliteration of...pale fan sent from Tokyo, held in place by a thin loop of silver paper, just at its breaking point, until the restraint had been

lifted away to release the motion of unfolding. Someone wanting the prop in cultural time. May I demonstrate my lineage?"

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Her feet were already in motion when she placed the fan in a silk brocade box inside another box of smooth cardboard and then a third, of good brown packing stuff, and addressed it to me, smiling to herself while her family awaited her presence at an elaborate dinner staged at the younger sister's house where servants never turned their backs and the chauffeur put his best foot forward for foreign guests—a house in which certain concessions were expected of her, the eldest sister, in spite of her reputation for eccentricities, travel in plastic shoes and the courting of adversity.

What shoes was she wearing, walking up and down hills, looking at our blue water? Her secret was not evident and I could only try to imagine it, even after she told me. Her feet inside and outside of her grandmother's feet, the unbreathing ligaments of even earlier feet in courtly brocade bindings, toes shrunk from the confined pressure of silver loops—the framing of the holding, the plot's single-minded ground—toes now open as a fan to catch light, the unveiled light in her motion away from it.

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I've understood, too, that writing on a lined page, particularly within the covers of a notebook, has provided me with a landscape of continuous blue horizons, below which I can sink, above which I may again rise, so that each line extended and wrapped into the next enacts a kind of hope, a proof that life below the horizontal does exist and may arise of its own motion or impetus to continue, as in breath, over which we have little control, although we can learn procedures, directing it to foreign anatomical regions.

Today our yoga teacher focused on our feet, showing us how to massage the bottom of one foot and then the other as if it were the palm of a hand, from the center towards the toes with a slow steady upwards circling, then directing us to a point below each toe, as if joined the trunk of the foot (if toes were branches), then to bring pressure, followed by an extended pulling and quick snapping motion of each toe. Circulating chi, she said. All of us in a line, doing this.

If you sat in the line of bodies on mats in the yoga studio, under the windows of the far wall facing out to afternoon light just gathering around petals now covering every visible branch (& already shedding on paths), also striking brick apartment buildings behind those trees, but stopping short of the river whose length and reflection must have contributed to the luminous wave and particle motion in the studio, you could feel only half of that light because your back was turned against the source of shifting and pulsing inside the room; whereas if you sat facing the windows, with your back against the opposite wall, as I always tried to do, a different fullness became part of the experience of the room and of the yoga postures as well, a kind of visual presence or figure for the low sound of tablas and stringed instruments coming from a concealed tape deck, as of voices calling after something ahead of them.

My mat was the blue one with my name written at one end, directly onto the foam rubber, in the wide stroke of my teacher's felt-tip pen, and I always looked carefully—once I'd unrolled the mat in the place I'd mentally marked as mine—to find, among the various colored blankets she'd provided in a wall cupboard at one end of the studio, a soft blue plaid that would draw me into a state of calmness, as if the water in the river were also blue, instead of muddy, and the sky an intense wintry cloudless blue, instead of burdening

the urban landscape with its heaviness of pale and dark grey storm clouds waiting to break loose.

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This is what I said about the foot, the man's foot in motion—that is, this is a sentence, once a part of what I wrote down or revised over several days, at least three years ago—this image from another's postcard photo—or it may have been a painting meant to **re**assemble the accuracy of photography, now both itself, and the fifty word statement I'd prepared for my friends who gathered to share their sentences, limited only by the number of words we'd agreed upon, as if in surprising ourselves skidding into the next arbitrary place, we might extend presence, just as the man's foot—for me, at least—seemed to express a form of desire in the motion of leaving or arriving.

I want to insert the sentence of the foot here but must find where I put it, maybe in a file-folder in the other city where I sometimes keep things—in the cardboard box or the blue plastic vegetable container from the San Cosimato market, left next to the dumpster. But lacking the sentence of that particular man's foot—both its movement, in relation to the wall behind it, and the way it stuck out from the bottom of a trouser leg (which would have been gun metal gray and a sort of late Thirties/mid-Forties cut, because of the WW II dread that seeped into me from it, not thinking about it then but noticing it later, looking back), I will mark this space as a kind of geometric memory bank, not so much to contain or trap the sentence but to give it a place to rest, once I find it, or even where it might reconstitute itself outside of the context in which it was first discovered.



The sentence, of course, will be different once it has been retrieved. Its placement will change it but also what has happened to me since writing it may affect my degree of discomfort towards it, so the reserved space—I've chosen a rectangular box-like container for it—might also stand in for something just below the horizon about to rise towards me. But if its substance is represented as that which resides inside the rectangle, isn't it immediately superceded by a symbolic or at least geometric reference to the authority of some earlier contour—even Euclidean in nature? And where does that leave me, I mean, my sentence? When I find it, or even if I simply know that it is in a place where I've stored it, will it still be connected to a pre-existing intelligence network as soft and wet and tangled as any recent techno-logical advance?

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I must remember to enter the narrator's life in as many ways as possible—[by "must", I mean that I crave intimacy and little corners but take even more pleasure in distancing devices, while sniffing the smell of leftover shampoo on a person's damp terrycloth robe]. I mean that I want to interrupt with a personal detail. I was stunned, for example, by the exact moment in a recent fictional work when a woman notices her foot stepping up onto a curb and understands this to be an "event." It was not so much the physical presence of the foot. No, that's wrong. it was the physical presence (even though we are given no details), but at precisely the same time—as in both sides of an equation—it was her knowing she knew, her discovering for herself the nature of

”an event “ or that this particular moment , or motion, had any importance at all to her in a world of rain and cars, influenza and the new skin product in its opaque blue glass bottle about to shatter on the edge of the tub, having fallen from the window ledge...a spiritual crisis disguised as diminishing counter space for appliances and other material goods not mentioned.

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It had happened, had been happening. An incremental shaping, a turning movement. You could also say that something suddenly leapt forward in the dark theatre and that what had been the curb now became a screen with her foot projected onto it just as it was lifting and setting itself back down. The screen was carried inside her, it having already installed itself, forming its contours again and again, but the light falling on her foot, as it appeared to lift of its own volition—as a separate animal, even—made it seem as if the projector was also hers, illuminating the moment which had been gathering in her, yet not hers, until now.

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In the middle of this account, the body rises “of its own accord” to stretch, no yoga class today, no iced drinks, sore throat and every surface feeling cold against the skin, something obdurate, the nature of early spring, wind and one’s resistance to or inability to resist it, body over-sensitive (even wrapped in long wool coat.)

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At the market, feeling vulnerable in exposed parts, air against face and hands and grateful for his body guiding me along, across wet rough surfaces, watching to keep me from slipping, skidding on square stones of little Roman streets. Man with horse and cart trotting along in traffic. Centaur. My century. About to turn. The whiff of red tomatoes, still attached to the vine with same acrid odor as my father's Victory garden so carefully tended. War stamp days. Little green beans in the market today, mushrooms stuffed with *con.di.men.ti.*. Behind the flower sheds, next to the iron railing separating the market stalls from the children's play area, a monster with a man's head and trunk, a horse's body and legs. His head emits a kind of music, he loves the romantic theme songs of American movies of the Forties and whistles as he sharpens knives against a device powered by/turning above a bicycle wheel he pushes, his hooves pressing the pedals, in place, whistling those old tunes from Mussolini times, but always off-key. Monstrous to a tuned ear. My ear, my sweet.

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