Something Bright, Then Holes

by Maggie Nelson
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Belladonna* pamphlet production and design, Bill Mazza:
www.mazzastudio.com
It is set in Geneva 9 and 36 pt, ITC Calson Medium and Bold, 9, 14 and 24 pt, 
and ITC Officina Sans 9 and 10 pt.

Price is $3 in stores or at events, $5 signed copies, 
mail order add 50¢ postage per item.
Belladonna* pamphlets are published periodically by Belladonna* Books.

Belladonna* 42 is published in an edition of 100—15 of which are numbered 
and signed by the poet—for her Belladonna reading at Zinc Bar, NYC, April 25, 
2003, with Elaine Equi.

Belladonna* is a reading 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.

Rachel Levitsky, editor belladonna* Books. 
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winter poem, 2003

it's another morning
of snow and blood
and deep green tea
its powder

before I awoke I took
a vow of silence, it was
the only way to heal
my jaw

at dawn the snow came
to make its frosting
today's blood comes
quiet and painless

whereas yesterday
it made a great circus
what's new is that
I'm an animal

with another animal
keeping company & time
it's the coldest spate of days
we can remember

my rings slip spontaneously
off my fingers
they say we make no defense
no 'meaningful opposition'

in my dream we escape captivity
by pretending to be mummies
when that doesn't work
we take heavy drugs

by day the radiator continues
to clank, a black flock of birds
scissors past the flag
and I speak
Something bright, then holes

I used to do this, the self I was
used to do this

the selves I no longer am
nor understand.

Something bright, then holes
is how a newly-sighted girl

once described a hand. The continuum
cracks, and now I am

half. A whole
half. I see that now, though

I still struggle to see
the beauty in front of me

O the blindness of having been born
able to see. Before

the planes flew
into buildings, before

people and paper came down
like heavy confetti

I used to do this, used to go
for broke. I re-read

your letters, and remember
correctly: you wanted to eat

Koan

from Jane

Not yet, says
a scrap of garbage
floated by

the wind.
Not yet, says
a limb of

lightning,
shrouded by
clouds.

A girl in a boat,
the boat full of holes.
Closer.

A slit sky.
A slit sky and a bowl.
Almost.
The Oracle

from Jane

Go down to the dumb oracle. Bring an offering of sorts—a pear, a cuticle, a block of quartz. Kneel down on the cold slab of marble wedged in the dirt.

Concentrate. Let the sun vault over its dial.

After a while a question will come. But as I already mentioned, the oracle is dumb. So trudge home to your room where candles make shadows of fruit. Ask the shapes Ask the dark city Am I to live this life with a blameless ferocity?

Then wait for morning to bring the bright sediment of things into focus. It comes clear.

through me. Then fall asleep with your tongue against an organ, quiet enough to hear it kick. Learn everything there is to know about loving someone then walk away, coolly I'm not ashamed Love is large and monstrous Never again will I be so blind, so ungenerous O bright snatches of flesh, blue and pink, blinding in the light then four dark furrows, four funnels, leading into an infinite ditch The heart, too, is porous; I lost the water you poured into it
20 Minutes

in-progress, & after Gillian Welch

days spent here, renting

time, days barely folding over
into night

you don't come home
you don't call home

heart lets loose one kernel, expels it
like a seed, a cluster
of debris

one kernel, one small injury

not the whoosh of death
not its blue comet
devastating the chest

just a kernel, cracked to show
its mealy center

I wander around, do things
that seem “good for me”
Later, at night, unravel

my dream-self, smothered
the room lit up by bugs

and you don't even remember your dreams

who cares what you'll say when you call and why
am I constantly seeing this red light
behind my eyes, why am I

When I was young I dreamt regularly
of purity
but I am no longer
that puritan

you, you stand pure as a tree
the question the ground asks of the sky

who cares now why
there is something
instead of nothing

the question now
is how did we become
earth's affliction
the blood exits without ceremony
exhales softly into the oily water
grows lukewarm as the afternoon soils itself
grey day now an orange night

solid static orange from the streetlights
so it’s never really night, I stay awake
watch the night vibrate
with its supernatural glow

These are the nights to come
These are the nights alone

Outside the search is on, for the druglords
in the projects
The search is on
for bodies in the pit, for clues the sniper left

On TV the men in FBI raincoats
walk together in a row
with a strange methodical closeness

their eyes riveted upon the nothingness

asphalt, grass

you could make a demand on me
you could ask me to lose my boundaries

leaving notes on strangers’ ears

the public molests me
no primitive bones in my body
man and woman are not primitive forms
curl into a fetus-shape and howl

they found the ice maiden
lying on her side, wearing a necklace
of wooden camels

elaborate blue tattoos encircling
her blades, the ink injected
with a needle of bone

her skin soggy and blue but still
(miraculously!) hugging its form

her eyeballs gouged out, the sockets stuffed with fur
brain siphoned out of a 2-inch wide hole
at the base of her skull

burnt coriander nearby, to cover her smell

they know she was young because of
the squiggly line down her skull, a sign
the skull is still knitting itself together

before 30, the skull is still knitting itself together
the seam moving toward seamlessness

my skull, almost seamless

red light behind my eyes, getting redder
no marriage no marriage
friend

I walk around the block enraged
the moon full, the brownstones
crippled by cuteness

I know you don't want my words, words
aren't "it," won't pull the cargo out of the station

what if where you are is what you need
sucking the dregs from the bottom of a basin

I boiled three pots of water to sit in the tub
watch the blood leave my body

felt a ribbon descend then exit
orange smoke billowing out
into water scented with oils

and if there is no kernel
and if there is no ritual
no 3-foot headress for the corpse, no six stallions slaughtered
and thrown in the grave

how shall I say it—we no longer
prize our decay

pure self has nothing to do with happiness
or does it
I don't care about self I want out
of my story

the story of a girl looking for quiet
as she charts noises
a girl just strange and quick enough
to be useless, to be hopeless
to see hope as a fetish

and if the purpose of language
is to generate more language
I am not sure I want it

there are people below
drinking amber liquids
look at that couple, I don't like the way
he holds her waist protectively
as they walk to the subway

I rent this view, this song lasts 20 minutes
all that happens in it
is one chord change, earned
by the plodding

of a girl singing with a voice like chalk smeared on metal
word-crumbs, dreams let go by
dreams with messages that flap out the window

*The helicopter can't break down now, she'll start to melt*

Was it a sign that the ice maiden didn't want to be taken
from her grave?
or is it simply the sound
of my impatience, the stupid echo
of my demands
no marriage no marriage
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