

be)(adonna* 32

Fall 2002



*The
Occasion*

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

The Occasion © Jennifer Moxley 2002

Belladonna* pamphlet production and design, Bill Mazza.

It is set in Geneva 9 and 36 pt, ITC Calson Medium and Bold, 9, 14 and 24 pt, and ITC Officiana 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* 31 is published in an edition of 100—25 of which are numbered and signed by the poet—for her Belladonna reading at Zinc Bar, NYC, September 27, 2002, with Chris Tysh.

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.

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The Occasion

*Far now from all the bannered ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading, and all wars were done.*

—E. A. Robinson

Suddenly, on every façade, on the well-kept red brick of Ezekiel Treat's, built 1869, on the crisp white siding of the immigrant couple, hiding from their disingenuous and felicitous neighbors, on the festive mobile home, struggling for relevance among lawn silhouettes and plastic sunflowers clacking a vulgar cheerfulness amidst the pocked bright plastic of dire poverty, the national symbol hung, and sometimes, exhausted fluttered, or on car antennas was ripped to shreds, as furious and ruined as an unhappy man enraged by the pathetic nature of his passive and soul-destroyed wife.

It was a few days after the start of the war and it was a war like many others, an atrocious "elsewhere" war, that provoked the typical history lessons—those that we cram to prepare for whenever the Empire looks stealthily down upon a new spot of old earth with trumped up salvation in mind. There is a perverse urgency to the history of obsolete places, a wayward poignancy surrounding the story of those about to be destroyed. "For the sake of fifty I will not do it." Pattern awareness saves no one, this war was, as always, and again, imminent. It was unavoidable.

There would be rhetoric for a while, but then there would be death, and some lives would improve and, others, well, it was hard to know, except death was certain, "elsewhere"

death, numbers in newsprint and sometimes personal death, close to home and painful. There had already been *some* death and *some* death was bound to lead to more, delicious to some, purposive, gorgeous and addicting, death. Such was the mood of the times when some seven of us left the reading and sought the warmth of a living room. We had come together to talk and drink wine, to share our points of view.

Our guest of honor, the poet, was tired but solicitous, and hungry to relax with us, she not had traveled far in order to stay distant. She wanted news. Personal news, gossip, and a confession of our feelings. It was a warm night. The electricity went down. It was All Souls Night. It was Halloween. She had read many poems about things lost in wars: our reason. her family. his body. their memory. her child. his joy. their money. his sanity. her hope. their belongings. his picture. her wedding ring. his baseball glove. their history. the common stories. All of them. Where did they go? Had they been bullied away? Replaced with a fake common story? Where are they? Not here. Any longer. They are gone. "For the sake of forty-five I will not do it."

Though we had come together as friends to seek solace in talk, we were fearful, defensive, giddy, hysterical, dominant and anxious in turn. We were the "us" and the "them," the "they" and the "what if," enemy and friend, accuser and accused. Our impotence was a red ball and it grew large and organic between us. It filled the coffee table and strained our voices. It stained our cheeks. This ball was not called "fear of death" nor "loss of liberty." It was called, stupidly, "love of life," and it made us quite ungenerous. Was it the first equation? Was it the war monger's gift? Had it been granted and were we complicit? Yes, yes, yes, *and yet* we could still speak and understand, our voices had not been stolen. Yes, we could still talk,

though there was also the issue of our ignorance, which was *green*, a green wall that magically formed into a labyrinth around us, brick by brick, encasing our bodies,

in a vulgar parody of playful shrubbery,
it bewildered and muffled our voices
so that soon each of us began to feel
that the others must be free of it, it was then
that we lost whatever chance we had
to help one another get out. One plus another.
One & then another. No hope
we might help
one another
get out

When we began to speak about power
the student among us contributed: "It is my belief
that women have much more power than men."
It was a form of inflated deference
but also a provocation and thus our protests
fueled his point and drove him to the fervent edge
and confirmation of his tactic. He was the center
and would extract our sympathy. He was denied
the women he wanted. Was his desire his birthright,
cut down by the mighty female "NO"?
NO no no. No: legal recourse when
*cut across the chest with a machete, thrown in a
toilet, raped. In the aftermath of genocide—
when women hate men, when semen floods
the streets and everywhere it smells like death.*
Mostly this hatred restrained by a thin skein of peace.
"For the sake of forty I will not do it."

The cat wandered in and was ignored
as she rubbed against the wicker chair.
The war at hand had taken all our thought
and all of our imagination. For all we knew
we might grow used to it, might even find relief
from our quotidian fixations. From justifying
these drinks, these spaces of discussion,
these feelings of despair, this wine, this anger,
this hunger for knowledge, this pretense,
this moral confusion, and so on.

Wearing a dark blue velour blouse, loosely
comfortable and ceremonious, our guest
spoke of mothers and sons. Of grief and loss.
Of worship and invisible things, of
the difficult vigil we must always keep
against the invasion of our minds.
She was emotional, or so said one of the men,
fearing I suspect what seemed apparent:

that she cared little for reason. Thrown off-kilter by the attention we gave her. Some of us were transfixed by her passion, by her freedom to speak without concern for judgement, she did not fear us, mild-mannered bullies, pummeling each other with data.

"I don't care what you think of me," she said
"I am the oldest one in this room,"
"I have suffered." "Fear cannot hurt me."
"My body is knowledge. My mind spirit."

Will a loss-strewn personal history swallow or create our relevance?
Does the permission to silence others come with the authority to speak?
Is the authority to speak the authority to condescend to those without authority who by definition cannot speak?
Up from historical silence into the new found power of speech only to find, waiting there, the awesome silence of the ongoing duty to those who are still unable to speak.

Safely the day had been conducted, the ending seemed appropriate and warm. Our private space held public debate. We could breath. Outside the symbols hung silent, for the night was quiet and unusually warm for that time of year. The softness of the space allowed for confessions. "How onerous I find the American flag." Be though it may the emblem of / the land I love, / the home of the free and the brave . . . would that I were now far from all the bannered ways . . . would that this symbol could address . . . *disquiet*. In the flag I see a gun appearing , the stripes the barrel, the stars like bullets, and I half expect, as a conspirator must, these traitorous visions transparent to all surrounding men.

A circle of consensus formed around these words which, according to one among us, did little more than express a more heinous reflection of the conformity outside—there on Ezekiel Treat's house, built 1869,

there on the crisp white siding of the couple
who had recently moved to this country,
there on the mobile home by the shell
of a rusted pick-up—and we, generally
proud of our opinions, did not understand
the deeper meaning of these seemingly
alien lives. Our very faith in our own
understanding made it by definition at fault.

These words were reflected back on their speaker,
who had become by his comments the new center,
and through the labyrinth the debate grew
warm, warmer, until it finally burned so hot
it seared the trust between us.

“For the sake of thirty I shall not do it.”

Intent misread dried up the common ground,
it turned arid and, soon after, unlivable.
All that had once thrived died. The designs
of the past had marked us, for better or worse,
and no amount of preparedness nor cash
could serve to save us when we stepped out
into speech like targets, powerless to know
the future, or which way the tide of common
prejudice, though it be shaped by the uncommon
few, would turn at any given moment.

“For the sake of twenty we shall not do it.”

Hold up, separated from the outside
world, together for one fleeting night,
after which our guest of honor would fly
away, and we return to daily work,
one by one we finally said goodnight.
Nothing prevented us from taking our leave,
we were not snowbound, we were not family,
once the occasion was over we had no reason
to stay. It had pulled us together to talk,
to drink wine and share our points of view,
it had pulled us together to redefine
the sum and substance of the common ground.

“For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

Had we stood upon it that evening through
our rootless, powerless thought? Or had it eluded us?
This so-called common ground.



be)(adonna* Catalog

Pamphlets are published in conjunction with the be)(adonna* reading series and are between 6 and 20 pages in length.

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