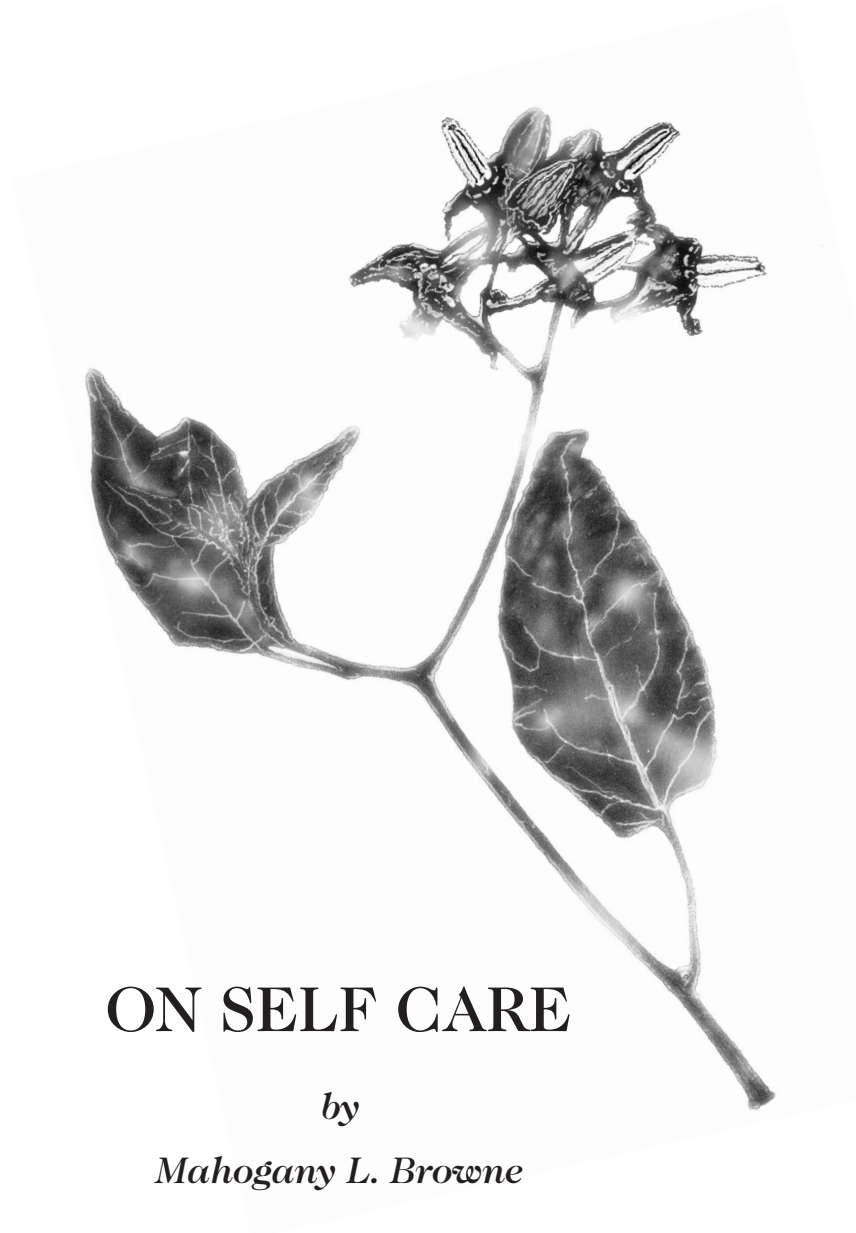


BELLADONNA\* CHAPLET SERIES



BELLADONNA\* COLLABORATIVE

925 Bergen Street, Suite 405, Brooklyn, NY 11238

ON SELF CARE

by

*Mahogany L. Browne*



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**On Self Care**

**Mahogany L. Browne**



## Ode to the Feet

& you ten can wink chancletas into silence  
you almost a dozen, a dirty pleasure for Tony  
& the red tiles of a nail salon in Brooklyn,  
& you coo, like no one's business

you left foot suspicious  
alive w/stitches  
prance upwards to the sky  
kiss a seal across the skin

where the bones creak & wheeze  
because the ankle is jealous  
& the surgery damaged each feeler  
named after foods

the corn is still delicious

& your lover will palm cocoa butter  
against the base of the foot  
a hoof  
no, a canoe

here, a girl will want feet like her mother  
instead, a girl will earn feet like her father

or a slave

it's all the same

the digits

add up



## The first kiss

is a library shadowboxing midday event  
is a high school Sophomore fresh mouth French kiss  
is a Dirty Dancing remake in the making  
with a nappy headed boy named Dominique

except it is nothing like Dirty Dancing  
Dominique is no Patrick Swayze

still

you are flying  
arms wide as a falling empire

you are climbing  
outside of yourself  
you are climbing  
to the safest branch in a tree above  
hands folded prim across  
a white ruffled skirt  
a promise of judgment braided into  
your hair

no, Dominique is no Patrick Swayze

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## When 12 Play Was on Repeat

when you are a deep amber & your jheri curl is a distant memory & your shape is swollen in the perfect places & the boys remember your name & your first and last crush sings to you come here with a lilt in his walk & his tongue wags you towards him with its pale pink & you smile because you remember the sun wrinkles your darkness so you pull corners of your bright face & squint like you practiced in the bathroom mirror where only a hint of your gap-tooth smile lingers like a wafer & you think of the time you danced in the basement against the brown boy with a half-moon fade beneath your hungry hands even then you were frowning in the dark trying to figure out if his fingers should shove themselves between your cotton & denim like that because you could not understand the wet & you frowned & he stopped & you thought i want to but his eyes were all over your face & his smell was copper & so close & you sighed & he stopped & you know now that means uncertainty but you were certain that you weren't certain enough to know what a sigh can mean but now you smile just in case anyone is really looking at your face & in the dark he says come here & he is what you've always wanted & it is in the senior class lock-in which is a storm of hormones high on endo smoke & everclear & everyone is touching someone & no one is frowning including you & it's like the time when stories are passed during homeroom & locker rooms & you always wanted to have a story for the cold tiles when there are only bra straps & lip gloss & hair brushes & smiles where no frowns are found because you don't know what it is like to lose yourself into a shadow you only know how to fold each breath like a blk girl mistake into the borrowed *whitestretch* jeans pocket & wait



## Vast

*"She pursued, adored and claimed me,  
and I was desperate to be claimed."* – Rebecca Walker

you held Justin's hand in the dark  
in the garage corner while everyone  
else pretended to not watch

you both were slippery tongues  
& new the idea of girlfriend swam  
a drunken song

you held my breath & his hand wandered  
you wondered & he tripped across your skin  
his eyes brown & one lazy

remain partially closed & full  
aware of the dark his lap almost  
a hot brick

your desire to be wanted  
a cooling dam so  
vast it drenched you both

but he is here  
his hands are privileged  
his tongue is wet with want  
you do not know he will be a father soon  
and his girlfriend will call you two days from now  
you will learn that his hands  
always find young girls like you

but he is here now  
thrusting his pelvis into yours  
like a history lesson  
and you thrusting back  
out of context and girlhood  
flipping back and back to  
the safest place in your spine  
your mouth a threshold of maybe  
and your fingers twirling his  
coily cut hair -- but your breath is so silent  
like books on the shelves  
in the library  
so you twirl your tongue  
back and back  
like the black girl perched  
in the white gathers above  
isn't watching

## The second

you come from a place where boys hunt new *tittified* frames  
& Clifton was always hunting something/ them eyes bugged out  
seeing everything that ain't want to be noticed

he scavage your new permed hair  
scour across your redred lipstick  
& wait

you tell him *i ain't fast*  
you tell him *i ain't trynna kiss all up on you*  
you reapply the redred lip smudge  
& think *i might as well since he lookin'*

besides, you already done snuck the stain  
from your big sister's purse/redred lip always  
had a way of making black girls feel like Marilyn Monroe

& you wasn't trynna really BE Clifton's girlfriend no how  
'cept he ain't hearing you/ he only lookin'  
& now ya'll in front of your mama's house  
on top of her once white 4-door cutlass hooptic

& Clifton pry open your legs    he say *give me a hug*

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his body from her bed    or her  
window ajar    the rotary phone  
ya'll laugh    a coil of secrets tapping against  
the carpeted floor    she  
sigh a breath of fresh crisp  
& alive against    your virgin ears

*"it feel like something inside is on fire"*

## Slink Feel Good

you ain't never been the type  
to let a man climb his ocean  
of a body through your bedroom  
window not like Li Li  
she first born daughter  
to a correctional baton man  
she learn quick how to sweet talk  
a man away from his sensibilities  
& you be: the type  
of swoon & shadow frame  
& sickle moon sliced into the  
brown you be: Li Li-like  
mimic you point your toes  
into the canvas of your bleached  
Keds straighten your stretch pants  
in plain sight & wait  
for any boy's heat to greet  
your famished eyes burnt orangish brown  
under the delirious sun  
Li Li always called you  
pretty always called the next  
morning when Steven slink

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& your cousin Niecey say *do it*  
& your lips say *be like Marilyn*  
like that one movie where she pout & shimmy & sing  
'bout diamonds & you ain't never seen diamonds  
but you practice the shimmy & pout when nobody lookin'

he wait  
then you break  
each arm a welcome float  
you still he wait  
& you hug him like you want to be hugged  
you say promise you leave *me alone now*  
he murmur something that sound like *maybe*  
*before his long mouth scoot in your direction*  
& you think *well, see here ain't we*  
& you try to dip your head like the pretty girls in the movies  
except he don't hug like a warm bath he wrap around  
your body tight a bear trap

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you learn a lot about yourself when you fall into the wet mouth  
of your first real boyfriend his jheri curl moisturize your dry &  
grateful hands you are an open spout & each black girl limb  
turned a greased wing of divine god(ly) appendage forms praying  
mantis stance today he is making you feel good for picking good  
for keeping good for more than just the wait & for the first time since  
you began this journey of spill you cannot remember the word  
ruin instead you focus on his fingers on your back how they  
feel so much better than your own against the slick pink he must think you  
are thinking of something less dangerous sand brown earth

*“I can’t look in her eye, seeing all that lonely, and think  
I got a right to keep being me” - p. smith*

because you don’t just walk in nobody’s house party  
a Brooklyn studio kitchen the size of your mama’s  
bathroom the brownstone stone blessed by fried  
chicken smolder & he’s dressed in white linen  
your box braids swing a single swagger his  
eyes dance destruction a pair of four alarm fires alight  
he spread each flame across your breasts slick your  
name like his gin ignore his porcelain skin date again &  
she wait like a mother told her women must do  
you just an Oakland intersection flailing Brooklyn men  
with your accent & gestures “have never been there before”  
so he say “I will drop her off” he say “let me take you”  
his smile a question mark his date’s slender haunts the night  
air & you brown dirty dark black blackest night midnight blue  
bl\_k girl y o u  
so  
blk  
somehow you forgot your name

once you snuck a boy into your mama's house he is the worst idea ever born this is before his box cut fade turned disaster  
warning smoke your trust can you you see it? his crooked yellow grin/a siren alarm/your hands crossed?

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## maternal advice

(coco)

I. Now

ignore your lover's name

his smile a stain smudged across everything before  
him and you will only remember your grandmother  
her words a flag of desperation and survival

– *do not love anyone more than they love you*

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## II. Then

you love too much  
you sing too much  
you laugh too much

so loud and bright stop

its like you challenging the world  
its almost like the world knows  
you ain't never been worn against  
nothing real

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## III. Soon

the clothes will wash themselves  
and your hands will find the softest  
folds of your body to break wet  
atop the bedroom sheets each night

& then you will search for

women poets &  
love if they find a romance that lasts  
love how long romance lasts when you say it slow  
love if they pose on book covers a glow fire of  
“yes, i deserve this” kind of love &

that suggests a body  
is never too old to bend over a kitchen sink for some kind of lasting lust

or maybe

they are alone like you & a selfish tide  
a forgotten breath until the page holds their name  
with a lover's attention maybe they too  
enjoy the taste of their own  
salty fingers in the dark

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