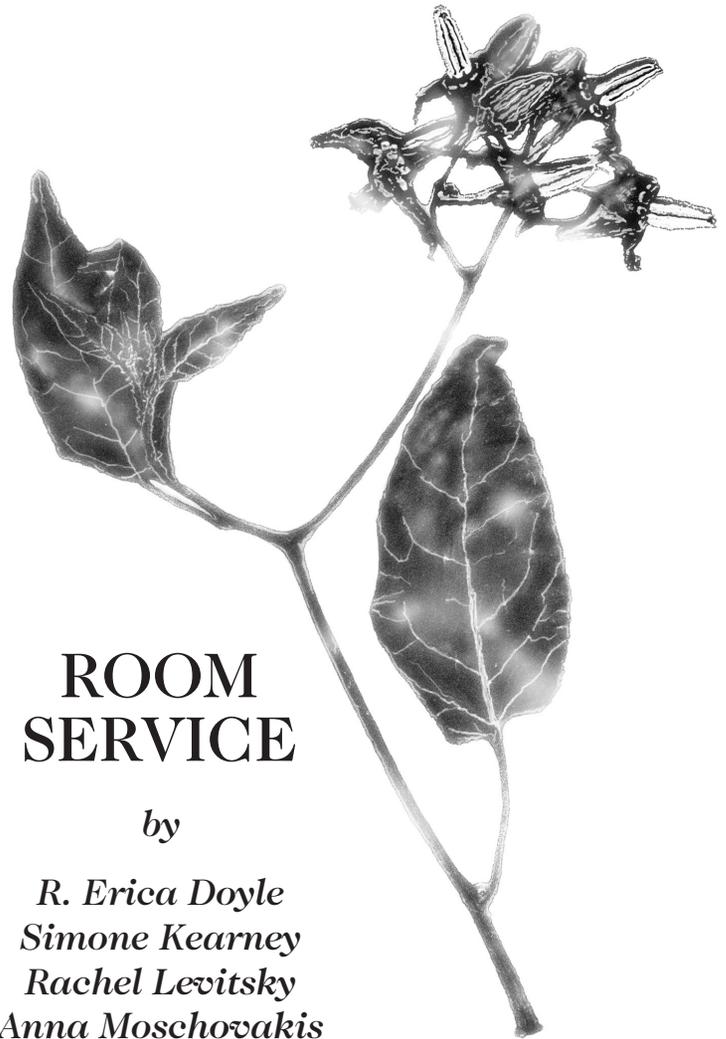


BELLADONNA* Material Lives
CHAPLET SERIES



ROOM
SERVICE

by

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

ROOM SERVICE

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Belladonna* Chaplet #150 is published in an edition of 126—26 of which are numbered and signed by the authors in commemoration of their off-site AWP reading in a *secret* hotel room on March 8, 2013.

Belladonna* is an event and publication 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 and dangerous with language.

The 2013 Belladonna* Chaplet Series is designed by Bill Mazza.

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**R. Erica Doyle
Simone Kearney
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Hoa Nguyen**

ROOM SERVICE (an anti-massive gathering)

In keeping with Belladonna* Collaborative's turn toward the materiality of writers' actual lives and bodies, we approached AWP with the question: what can we do that won't hurt in the tourbillion of overstimulation we tend to feel there, and are perhaps a bit destroyed by? With this event and chaplet, we gesture instead toward intimacy and comfort, reading in bed with friends in a friend's hotel room. Champagne. Putting our feet up. Recumbent listening. The chaplet reflects points of process, new work, immediate thinking-in-the-moment.

Here were the questions we posed to the readers. Not overdetermined. Not required.

How and why did you write your recent publication/work? How would you like it to be read or which questions would you like to be asked about this work? How does the world enter?

Here are out-of-context bits pilfered from the works and statements of process:

“sentences designed to aggravate splendor”

“I wanted it to matter.”

“How can I find the songs that need to be sung?”

“I thought it was really good, really beautiful. I was proud of it.”

“Does it mean quite a lot...”

Asserting: viscerality, necessity, intimacy, deep attachment.

Achieved by a variety of means.

Ever the work of the hand (body) reaching toward another.

We know you will enjoy what was conjured/ordered up.

— Rachel Levitsky & Emily Skillings

P.S.

for Marina Lazzara—from her note in October

If you get this
before you leave

take some California Irises
home with you

Put in fridge until Spring
Plant in circle

How Proxy Was Born

Proxy was born after 9/11 in ashes and smoke and a Patricia Smith workshop full of queer black women. I continued it in 2003 in Erica Hunt's workshop, long after I'd thought the story was over. Samiya Bashir published the "palimpsest" section then, in *Best Black Women's Erotica 2*.

Proxy as music: I collaborated with composer Joshua Fried to create an electronic and acoustic chamber piece that became "phasedown" and we performed it in the Composers Collaborative Non Sequitur festival at The Flea in Tribeca. That was the last show of mine my mom came to before she died.

In 2005 it took its final form as a manuscript. I showed it to a few friends and ex-lovers. I thought it was really good, really beautiful. I was proud of it.

I sent it out.

A small press publisher had asked me to send her some of my work. I sent it to her. She said she loved it, but hers was a black press, and she didn't see how the characters were black. She suggested I send it somewhere literary and gave me names of who she thought might be interested. I sent it. No interest.

I sent it to fiction editors and poetry editors. The director of my writing program introduced me to a well-respected publisher who asked me to send to her the manuscript. I did. I never heard back. The next year, one of the publisher's authors introduced me to her again, sure the silence was a mistake, and she said to send it to her again. I did. I never heard back.

I sent it to contests, though I couldn't imagine any of them would accept it. I hadn't seen any of them publish anything with that much sex in it and I didn't think they would start now. They didn't. I sent it to presses who published sexual content—silence.

Proxy as performance art: in 2006 I performed parts of it with visual artist Torkwase Dyson in the Transmodern Age Festival for Avant-Garde Performance Art in Baltimore.

Shelagh Patterson pushed me to submit it to the 2007 Cave Canem Poetry Prize—Claudia Rankine was the judge and she was sure she'd love it. She did, and chose *Proxy* as a finalist. *Proxy* had “finalized” and now had a little longer of a resume. I did a Segue reading that year, and a Belladonna* reading, where parts of “petroglyph” were published in a chapbook commemorating the reading.

I sent to contests a bit more halfheartedly, and then in 2009 ran into a friend at AWP in Chicago who advised me to do as he did and send to over 40 contests. He had and had won the National Poetry Series. I hated to think of spending more money for nothing.

At one point, someone told me to just “take the sex out” so it would be easier to publish. I demurred. I have emails from friends in 2010 with suggestions of presses who might be interested—FSG, Alyson, and others. Everyone was trying to figure out how I could get this book out into the world.

I decided to do one last round of plastering the manuscript—well by this time I had two more I was sending around also—and see what happened. I set aside the money, and sent. I got a few nice rejections this time, with notes.

By the time 2011 AWP in DC rolled around, I was feeling like this thing would never be published. I'd started it ten years before, for god's sake. I went to the conference to see my friends and hopefully get a little pick-me-up. I'd lived in DC and it was like a second home. Hanging out with my writer friends revitalized me. We had many racial moments that inspired me with their transgression, anger and fun.

I went to a great panel where women journal editors encouraged us to just keep sending and sending out work, since women got so easily discouraged. “If you reject a man, he will resubmit,” they said. “If you reject a woman, you'll never see her work again.” A few people who were readers came up to me and said they loved the book, and were sorry it had not been chosen. That made me feel better. At least someone was reading it and enjoying it. But still no pub.

What started to happen, seemingly out of the blue, were unsolicited invitations to read. From March to August I had nearly two a month, for a total of nine, more than I had ever had. Well, that was strange, I thought. I'd blanketed the world with my manuscripts, and instead of publications, I get readings. A bit confused, I nonetheless took this as a window to all the closed doors.

MY GREEN

(my green grief)
I had believed an open
mouth I disobedience

informed by a spider (ushered
from an eye)

Many pale green
peppers in the garden

and freak out
& fall down in a weep

I said my heart was a coal miner
cave-in It was caved-in
walking around

How to be
moving like words & magic

the true blue song & damp
deck & wet pussy

& the trees have leaves
shaped like a heart
heart-shaped leaves

We sent the spider
to the window for luck

The song plays on the player-
less player piano

the scroll or roll
where the absent words were

punctuated shredded parts
the absent words
that tell you how
to sing the impossible
song

THE WHITE BOARD

The white board says “vag bleed”
I read Anna Karenina

If your mother is a waitress
Trees I gave them names

as a girl The female ones
assigned “sad” and willow Why

Another with a white
beard

I hid the old dime there
silver sliver

Was her name Ida
with worn old feet

pennilessness & blue blankets
(polyester)

All the time: goodbye to this
Extinguish This extinguish

in the wrongest of places
You eat the moon

suns or chase the chase here
Bell Bell mortal

The second to last reading, in July, was Hot Texts, hosted by Krystal and Emily from Belladonna. In August they sent me an email asking if *Proxy* was still available, as they wanted to suggest it to the collective for publication. Belladonna ranked with Kelsey Street Press for me – invitation-only women’s avant-garde presses who published work I really loved. I sent the manuscript to them, and in November 2011, they said the collective wanted to publish it.

So that is one version of how *Proxy* was born, published 12 years after it was written.

Once a dream told me very plainly that I was a singer of songs. I was pointed to a live recording of Waylon Jennings singing *Waymore Blues*. In this recording he admits that he didn't know what he was saying when he wrote the song, that he still both does and doesn't know. Thanks dream: this feels accurate to how I feel when I sing-write. I try to invite the music and then dance with its knowledge; it feels like being bound in a spell. I often hope to activate a kind of conjuring. I read and I live: when I write I try to get out of the way, remain unstructured, knowing and not knowing, in order to invite the song inside me. Whatever "I" I am meets "it." Fun.

I worry in the wonder of song. How can one sing through grief: planetary, personal, and historical? How can I find the songs that need to be sung? I think of my word art as a kind of whirling of the elements: listening, breathing, and moving—to stir the details of life in the transpersonal conjuration of song. I try to make language lift off the page for my readers, and in doing so invite a new imagination of the world into being. In the phrasing of *Waymore Blues*:

If you wanna get to heaven gotta D-I-E
you gotta put on your coat and T-I-E
Wanna get the rabbit out of the L-O-G
You gotta make a commotion like a D-O-G

We started the poem by talking about our dream about flying.

We'll start the poem by playing with various words in our head til they click.

We can't write this poem because we can't relate to it anymore.

We wanted to write a poem because we love to share our words with anyone who will listen.

We wanted to write a poem because we admire the way poetry flows and how it can be a sort of abstract way to express our self.

We wrote the poem because we were angry.

We started the poem by just writing what came to mind and letting it go from there.

We wrote the poem because it's how we express our feelings.

We wrote this poem because we wanted to put into words what we feel so then we might understand.

We can't write this poem because we can't feel it.

We can't write a poem because the emotions we feel don't seem real.

We wanted to write a poem because we want to make our feelings known.

We'll kill our poem by overthinking and overconvoluting or oversimplifying and distancing.

We can't write this poem because it hasn't found us yet.

How and why did you write your recent publication/work? How would you like it to be read or which questions would you like to be asked about this work? How does the world enter?

Do you think one of the problems is that the discourse has collapsed? Does that make sense? How can we radicalize that? I mean, a knitting circle does that, you know? Have people reacted to you in terms of, "I can't believe that you're talking about violence"? Are you yourself, for instance, interested in having your work reveal a minimal past? How about now? Are you doing something now? Who are your main characters? Do you really think so? How would you define the word "paranoiac"? What led you to do that so quickly? What other effect did contact with an audience have on you? Did you go to a lot of plays in your youth? Has music influenced your writing, do you think? So this circumstance of composition is not likely to be repeated? Do you have a particular interest in psychology? As real as people you know? Did this lead you toward some kind of pacifism? Do you see yourself in that role? Do you read things written about you? How much are you aware of an audience when you write? There are sexual undertones in many of these crisis situations, aren't there? The critics? Is universality a quality you consciously strive for? Does this make you feel behind the times in any way? Shouldn't they be having fun? Is Beckett an important writer for you? You mean it has an eccentric or idiosyncratic shape to it? And to the history that formed them? [Laughter] Better than the Bible? Has Shakespeare always been that important for you? Could you talk about how you moved from one form to the next? What was the impetus for this change? Does that sense of the uncanny resonate at all for you? So the autobiographical approach to poetry doesn't appeal to you, even curiously so? Is happiness so rare in your work? Do you like to tease or play games with the reader? Did you plot to take over the literary world? Why? Could you explain the paradox concerning ambiguity and certitude? So you have a sense of several selves? Would you agree with that? Do you have rituals? How do you know when something is a calling? When you would wander in the woods and write, did people ever think you were crazy? Did you ever ask yourself, "Why

am I doing this? Do you have a favorite word? What does that mean? Can you tell me about that? Does the thought of broadening out excite you, scare you, relieve you? You've come into your own more? What was your childhood like? So getting lost but avoiding confusion—is that the game? Who are you speaking to? Do you care? Invariably, much of what goes into our heads before/during/after writing is a perishable history; but maybe there's something to reflect on, reveal or credit parenthetically? So tell me about how this all came about? Would you agree with that?

[political poem]

We wrote this poem because of the compelling journey we have started.

We'll kill our poem by fire.

We wanted to write a poem because our insides told us we had to.

We can't write this poem because our words are insufficient.

We'll kill the poem by trying to write it.

We wanted to write a poem to convey thoughts or memories.

We wrote the poem because we needed some way to take our memories out of our head for a moment and let our self breathe.

We wrote the poem because we wanted to write down a few memories that we have of our uncle that passed away a year ago.

We started the poem by listing words that describe night.

We wrote the poem because we still see the good in everyone.

We wrote the poem because we wanted to be a voice of influence and to tell a story.

We wrote the poem because we needed to.

We wrote the poem because a friend of ours was going through a tough time and needed inspiration.

We'll kill our poem by smothering it in kindness.

We wanted to write a poem because we wanted to create something new.

that was filled to capacity on this particular weekend with members of the Lion's Club at its annual meeting, and tried to think about what I wanted to "tell" a team of aspiring writers and misfits from the middle of Illinois (not Chicago) and what I wanted to "do" with them. I didn't have much time. I wanted it to matter. I had the students "experiment" Bernadette Mayer. I had them "wread" Charles Bernstein. I had them "appropriate" Rob Fitterman. I had them "ruin" poems and I saw with pleasure that they "liked" their ruined poems better than the "good" ones they'd ruined. I had them rip up a book to use for material and I saw with pleasure how they felt "bad" about "destroying" a book, even though it was really only a vintage magazine, and I had an identical copy which I had brought with me to assuage their fears of being "punished" for destroying something "sacred." They wrote poems using the pages ripped from the book and I saw with pleasure how they disagreed about whether or not the resulting poems were "their own." At the end of the lesson, we held an "open mic" in the classroom, and I saw with pleasure how many of them chose to read one of their "ruined" poems or a poem that was not "their own," rather than the poems they had brought with them on the bus from the remoter parts of Illinois (not Chicago), and I saw with pleasure how "funny" they were, both the poems and the aspiring writers and misfits themselves. But before all of this, at the very beginning of the "workshop," I had written some "writing prompts" on the chalkboard and collected the students' responses. During the portions of the workshop when they were "writing," I made a poem from their responses. I titled it "political poem." It is not my own.

Une Barque sur L'océan

Très envelopés de pédales —
But where are you again, piquant in glazed
grass—shoved, tinged, fatty sorts of experience?
Are you mousse in the creases of tree pulp?
No, you are only in the elevator
smelling of boiled carrots, pressing
the "close door" button so that we can both
feel better about ourselves: we are in a hurry.
I place myself palely in front of you, as if I could fit
into any hour, limp kneaded wafts of days
fanning out for your half-filled eyes
peeping at steam.
You seem to be asking me something,
something about an example of frills on erosion,
grape-colored rain,
or waves closing like the flaps of envelopes,
a forest of frosted-over sea, blunt crotch-domed
sentences designed to aggravate splendor
around some tired lip,
some left out, spread, filtered lip?

We Wrote the Poem / We'll Kill the Poem

I had received an invitation to “feature” in a literary festival. It was in the middle of Illinois (not Chicago). I looked it up. I couldn’t figure out why I, particularly, had been invited. I looked at the other authors who had been guests in previous years, at the authors who would be my fellow guests, my “fellows.” I did not “fit in.” My book had won an award, judged by poets I admire. As a result of the award, 6,000 people who are members of the organization that granted the award received a copy of my book in the mail. Some large portion of these recipients surely did not open the book. Some small portion did, and some small portion of those who did open the book found it either “repelling” or “interesting” or “good”; some of them have written about this on the internet. One of the ones who found it interesting or good must, I assume, have been the person who invited me to the literary festival in Illinois (not Chicago), where my tasks included leading a workshop with unspecified students and delivering a “craft talk” to the same unspecified students. A “craft talk,” it turned out, was a form of explanatory lecture with which the other “featured” writers—a fiction writer, a nonfiction writer, and another poet—were familiar. Their talks were “good.” The unspecified students, it turned out, were in high school—a self-selected team of “aspiring writers” and misfits from the surrounding towns and counties, bused in from up to two hours away, from even deeper in the middle of Illinois (not Chicago), for a weekend of reading and writing “literature.” I had been very busy leading up to the festival; I was behind. I had not written my “craft talk” and I had only vaguely thought about my workshop, which I had assumed, based on my initial scant correspondence with the festival’s organizers, would be more like a “classroom visit” at the university that was hosting the event. So I stayed up late in my hotel room, in the convention center that was larger than the town, that held more people than did the town,

Go On! Eva Hesse, Emma Bee Bernstein, Akilah Oliver and Stacy Doris: A Present Clamor and A Future Conversation

Rather than talk about the novel, *The Story Of My Accident is Ours*, just out in this moment and which I had been working on, almost solely but not completely solely, that is in terms of ‘creative writing’ output, for 7 years, I would like to write about something else, about a poem, or a poetry play, or an epistolary hybrid—I don’t know which because I haven’t written it/researched it yet—that is about four women who passed away when they were younger than age 50.

Two of them are visual artists and two of them are poets. In fact, the two poets were both 49 when they died and the two artists died much younger, Eva died at 34 and Emma at 23. Does it matter of the latter that they also both have first names which begin with E and that they are both Jewish, or that these two died without having had children and that the other two, the poets both 49 when they died, who were not both Jewish, one was Black and one was Jewish, were mothers? Do these intersections stand for connections?

I have begun to use only first names for all of them; in person I only knew two of them, Akilah and Emma. I once had an email exchange with Stacy to invite her to read for Belladonna when alas she could not: she’d just been delivered two nearly simultaneous babies.

Although as of late, I tell young interns, “Don’t know everyone!” for myself I find it is hard, not having known her.

That three of all of them are Jewish and one of all of them is Black. Here is this a term of ratio? or my closeness? I was not close to Emma but I was close to her death.

I felt Emma’s death; I thought unreasonably so.

Many if not most of my close poet friends were close to Stacy.

Yesterday on the phone with Bear I recalled that I had always considered my poetics to be a poetics of intimacy. And still do. She was talking about Angel’s theory of the intimate sentence. When I went home I told Vincent that this is why I cannot shake my Francophilia, the French infuse the affect and grammar of the sentence as a place of inquiry at least attempts

at knowledge. Some such. They dwell there, *La Batarde*, *Nadja*, and the visitor, *My Paris*.

Is it strange to say that I love them, Emma and Stacy and Eva. That I read them (now, I have not been such a reader of all of them always) like I read my friends, which is a particular way of reading, a poets way of reading—we poets I posit, approach all poet lines that way, as if written by our friends, we think we must be able to read them as we read ourselves, which is to know something about experience and making and truth, through the placement of the word.

Hence I am writing this: on an **unwritten** so unfathomable that it shuts down my recollection of dream.

Does it mean quite a lot that the poets were 49 and I am 49. Or that they were irreverent and I am irreverent. Does it matter that one was my very good friend. That I found her decomposing. That I should have found her sooner. That she was alone and I am alone. That I feel much more alone since she died. That perhaps upon her death I inherited her condition. Something she predicted at least once, in a poem.

I do have a confident impression that these four come easily together. There might be other chapters with other dead ones that come together. Or others' dead ones that come together. Come together is connection not intersection. One chapter might include Leslie Scalapino and kari edwards. You can see that they go together. Neither is Jewish or Black. Is it accidental. Another Pat Parker and June Jordan. Where would Melinda Markham go. There would be chapters by writers other than myself. And then there is the last chapter, which includes us ones left by those who died. Chapters on the historically dead: Barnes, Leduc, Bourgeois.

I have been trying to avoid using my individual life and its grief and sadness as a goad for writing. Why.

Do you agree that people try to make sense of death? For example, I say: Akilah died of touchlessness. Everytime I say it or write it, I feel absolutely sure it is so. Someone else wrote that she died of not taking care of herself. Many see it as a heartbreak coming from her son's death by racist classist medical neglect. I agree with that but I also don't.

Akilah and Stacy were queer in the way that term is used these days broadly defined. Stacy did marry Chet and like Anne Waldman, wrote into the phenomenon of the marriage. I became interested in Stacy's marriage, this love that was all. Caroline—I asked her about this relationship—then

talked so intelligently and generously about the relationship of Stacy and Chet, and I am sorry that I don't remember everything she said. I recall that their connection was such that they did not want to sleep apart. I remember that. The image I have from our conversation, is that Stacy elevated this relationship. Devotional. That is the term I will use, but it is not Caroline's. Whose original and vivid language I want but cannot remember.

I feel no need to say anything very critical about the dead. Akilah did take care of herself. Perhaps the only one who did.

More than connection. Stacy and Chet: intersection.

Akilah was a Lesbian when we first met and then she had a kind of trans phase. Theorizing the mutability of bodies of desire. Stacy wrote a book called *Conference* that textualizes the mutability of bodies of desire. *Conference* is also about death and birds. Poetry books can still be about more than one thing.

I have come to realize that I will have to write through this grief, or I would not write at all.

Eva and Emma. We can say of their work, a visualization and materialization of shiftiness and mutability in bodies that desire. Desiring in the open mouth of fear, not fearless. I don't think they were identified as queer. That raises questions about identity and the inside and the outside. Where identification comes from. I can't confidently say they are not queer.

All four: badass, disobedient, formidable, adorable.

Poetry is the part where you try to utter the impossible, an abstracted space in which to temporarily dwell. I haven't yet thought enough about this. *Eva and Emma the visual counterpart. More on this. Find it to be less parallel, more intertwined.*

The Eva Hesse exhibit at the SF MOMA, 2002. I bought the October Files #3 there then. But it got lost in my things. Last week Nat found it behind books while helping me reorganize my library. And I read the 1970 interview by Cynthia Nemser.

Now in the realm of coincidence. Both connection and intersection.

The spine once orange has faded to yellow.