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**Opening Extract from...**

## **The Interrogative Mood**

A Novel?

Written by Padgett Powell

Published by Profile Books

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THE  
INTERROGATIVE  
MOOD

PADGETT POWELL

A NOVEL?

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For Elena

*Do you take it I would astonish?  
Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart  
twittering through the woods?  
Do I astonish more than they?*

—WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF"

THE  
INTERROGATIVE  
MOOD

**ARE YOUR EMOTIONS PURE?** Are your nerves adjustable? How do you stand in relation to the potato? Should it still be Constantinople? Does a nameless horse make you more nervous or less nervous than a named horse? In your view, do children smell good? If before you now, would you eat animal crackers? Could you lie down and take a rest on a sidewalk? Did you love your mother and father, and do Psalms do it for you? If you are relegated to last place in every category, are you bothered enough to struggle up? Does your doorbell ever ring? Is there sand in your craw? Could Mendelejev place you correctly in a square on a chart of periodic identities, or would you resonate all over the board? How many push-ups can you do?

Are you inclined to favor the Windward Islands or the Leeward Islands? Does a man wearing hair

tonic and chewing gum suggest criminality, or are you drawn to his happy-go-lucky charm? Are you familiar with the religious positions taken regarding the various hooves of animals? Under what circumstance, or set of circumstances, might you noodle for a catfish? Will you spend more money for better terry cloth? Is sugar your thing? If a gentle specimen of livestock passed you by en route to its slaughter, would you palm its rump? Are you disturbed by overtechnical shoes? Are you much taken by jewelry? Do you recall the passion you had as an undergraduate for philosophy? Do you have a headache?

Why won't the aliens step forth to help us? Did you know that Native American mothers suckled their children to age five, merely bending at the waist to feed them afield? Have you ever witnessed the playing of shuffleboard at a nudist colony? If tennis courts could be of but one surface, which surface should that be? In your economics, are you, generally, laissez-faire or socialist? If you could design the flag for a nation, what color or colors would predominate?

Should a tree be pruned? Are you perplexed by what to do with underwear whose elastic is spent but which is otherwise in good shape? Do you dance? Is



having collected Coke bottles for deposit money part of the fond stuff of your childhood? Have you inadvertently hurt, or killed, animals? Would you eat carrion? When it comes to pillows, are you a down man or feather? Are you a man? Will you place two hundred dollars in the traditional red envelope and give it to me? Have you ever had to concern yourself with the imminence of freezing water pipes or deal with frozen water pipes? How is your health? If it might be fairly said that you have hopes and fears, would you say you have more hopes than fears, or more fears than hopes? Are all of your affairs in order? Would you have the slightest idea, if we somehow started over, how to reinvent the radio or even the telephone? Do you recall the particular manila rubber buttons in the garters that held up ladies' hose before the invention of pantyhose? Who would you say is the best quarterback of all time? Between an automobile mechanic and a psychologist, which is worth more to you per hour?

Are you happy? Are you given to wondering if others are happy? Do you know the distinctions, empirical or theoretical, between moss and lichen? Have you seen an animal lighter on its feet than the sporty red fox? Do you cut slack for the crime of pas-

sion as opposed to its premeditated cousin? Do you understand why the legal system would? Are you bothered by socks not matching up in subtler respects than color? Is it clear to you what I mean by that? Is it clear to you why I am asking you all these questions? Is, in general, would you say, much clear to you at all, or very little, or are you somewhere in between in the murky sea of prescience? Should I say murky sea of presence of mind? Should I go away? Leave you alone? Should I bother but myself with the interrogative mood?

**CAN YOU RIDE A** bicycle very well? Was learning to ride one for you as a child easy or not? Have you had the pleasure of teaching a child to ride a bicycle? Are your emotions rich and various and warm, or are they small and pinched and brittle and cheap and like spit? Do you trust even yourself? Isn't it—forgive me this pop locution—hard being you? If you could trade out and be, say, Godzilla, wouldn't you jump on it, dear? Couldn't you then forgo your bad haircuts and dour wardrobe and moping ways and begin to have some fun, as Godzilla? What might we have to give you to

induce you to become Godzilla and leave us alone?  
Shall we await your answer?

Do you ever suffer that sinus condition that effects exactly the sound of a raccoon in your head? Are you as much fascinated as I by the science and indeed art of artillery? Are you as much put off as I by the phrase “science and art,” and more put off by the phrase “science and indeed art”? Who is your favorite painter?

Is your appreciation of a good material thing—let us say that pearl-handled revolver there—influenced by having worked hard to get it, or are you as likely to value a good thing having come by it easily? Do you value coherence of argument? Do you favor a day of the week? Have I told you that I have taken refuge in and, verily, succor from the Shodlik Palace in Tashkent, Uzbekistan? How much weight should a child porter be required to carry? Do you ever wonder after the stories stolen in Mr. Hemingway’s valise on the platform in Paris? That he had no copies, that he had so many bags he could not keep track of them—are not these facts but proof of a boor and a brute who deserved it? Do you know what I mean by “it”?

Do you wish, as we all do, that you had a sunnier

disposition? Would you like to learn to lift weights? Are you comforted by the assertion that there are yet people on Earth who know what they are doing? Or, like me, do you subscribe to the notion that people who knew what they were doing began to die off about 1945 and are now on the brink of extinction? That they have been replaced by fakes and poseurs? That in ten more years, when everyone rides a Segway talking on cell phones imbedded in their iTeeth, the clueless world will be painfully immanent? That a large number of the world's folk will be fervently annihilating themselves, if they have not already starved, and a small number of the world's folk will be excited by rapid online acquisition of an exorbitant T-shirt?

Have you used the Tibet Almond Stick from the Zenith Chemical Works in Chicago on fine furniture? Would a good paper airplane give you a soupçon of pleasure? Provided you were given assurances that you would not be harmed by the products of either, would you rather spend time with a terrorist or with a manufacturer of breakfast cereal? What in your view is the ideal complexion for a cow? Is there a natural law that draws a plastic bag to an infant similar to the law that draws a tornado to a mobile home? Do you

understand exactly what is meant by *custard*? Would it be better if things were better, and worse if things were worse, or better if things were worse and worse if things were better?

Have you heard the expression “the ragman,” and have you any idea what a ragman does, or did? Is it still the case that you can buy build-your-own electronics kits from people like Heathkit and Lafayette Radio and Knight-Kit? Is a body catching a body coming through the rye regarded a good thing or a bad thing? Is there a reason that chlorophyll is green as opposed to, say, red, or is this another alleged instance of Darwinian accident? If someone said that a certain kind of guitar playing—I’m thinking of Clapton in Cream here—has a tubular sound, would this mean anything to you? Do you know that there are fighting kites? Can you imagine the fortune to be made were someone to genetically engineer a perpetual kitten? Can you see yet (I hardly mean to single you out: we will all look horrible and we will all look like old women) how horrible you will look as a very old woman? Would you rather have, in principle, fifty one-pound bags or one fifty-pound bag? Is the universe supposed to be running out of steam, or somehow is

it getting new steam, or is it just holding the steam it has?

If the observation were made to you that “Strangers become intimate, and as intimacy grows they lower their guards and less mind their manners until errors are made, which decreases intimacy until estrangement exceeds that which existed before the strangers ever met,” would you be inclined to agree? Do you know that a Gaboon viper is stout enough to knock a cow down? Do you know what is meant by the term “blackwater river”? In what area does your want of learning concern or disappoint you most, botany or mathematics? If architecture is frozen music, do we not deserve the whole cookbook of such recipes? When you hear the expression “Those were the days,” or any equivalent allusion to the good old days, are you inclined to dismiss the speaker as a sentimentalist or do you credit that there indeed were better days? Do Darwinian accidents account for dogs and cats, and not, say, monkeys and possums, becoming domesticated, or does it owe to another kind of force, perhaps spiritual? Do you wonder, when you wonder things like who first got the gumption to eat an oyster, who first got the idea to *weave*—was not a moment like that

*really* cutting-edge, as opposed to all the foofoo nano-refinements of today, which amount to the playing of checkers with the microchip?

Have I forgotten the question that goes here? Was it “Is it raining?” Do you regard rain as an anesthetic? Does pain purify? Are your nerves steady like those of the velvet ant, buzzing steadily across the lowly dull ground in its jacket of carmine velour and black satin? Do you know how to safely determine if the velvet ant stings? Have you seen the wall-sized bronze periodic table of the elements monument to Mendeleev in St. Petersburg? Do you know that there is trash beneath it? Have you ever had antivenin? Why is it *-venin* and not *-venom*?

Isn't wool a marvel? Does it seem to you that ferries are involved in a disproportionate number of accidents? Can you think of any amusing confusions of the word *contraption* for the word *contraction*? Are you a taker of vitamins? What about confusing *confusion* with *contusion*, or *hypnosis* with *anhydrous ammonia* or *electrolysis*? If the blue royalty gets the red carpet, does not the common man turn green with envy and the revolutionary black with rage? Do you know what the actual song of a nightingale sounds like? Is the

nightingale a real bird, and is it native to our shores? Whose death, recent or not, do you most lament? Have you ever watched high-rise construction? Would you like to drink cool clear water from a fat red hose? Have you eaten hot gritty radishes fresh from the ground? Do you appreciate that an oyster has, among its other organs, a *heart*?

This business of the ears and nose allegedly continuing to grow throughout one's life—can that be part of a great and benevolent creator's design, part of a malevolent god's design, or is it another inscrutable facet of natural selection? Is survival enhanced by a man's looking more and more like an elephant as he nears his grave? What is your mother tongue? Do you like to party? Was there a period in your adolescence when you eschewed underwear? Do you eschew it now? Do you favor peanuts, cashews, or nuts more exotic? Will you have a pet before you die, if you do not have one now? Do you grasp Ohm's Law? Do you regard cherries a fruit or a natural candy? Is intelligibility a function of the intelligence of the speaker, the listener, or both? Is it overrated? Is the human individual more important than the individual ant, and if so by a factor, what would you say, of what?



Do you like to carpool? Have you ever seen a large woman boil sugar watching the candy thermometer closely? Wouldn't it be better to have lived in an era when we routinely wore "leggings"? Are boys meaner than girls, or vice versa? Isn't acrylic paint essentially plastic of some sort? In what ways do you discharge your civic duties? If you could assign colors to the days of the week, what color would you assign Tuesday? Is the blue jay justly maligned? Did ball sports originate as rock sports, or heads-of-animals sports, or what, do you think? Do you take your bacon crisp or limber? *Terrefly* or *terrederm*—is there a word in this vicinity I can't think of, or is there a word in this vicinity that needs to exist but doesn't? How did the Chihuahua's head and the apple get congruent like that? Did you see the pair of little blue pants by the road? Do you think you'd feel better had you a degree in some kind of engineering? What kind of engineering would that be?

Are you much on games of chance, or cards? Is there anything sadder than the demise of the elephant, among all the sad demise of the modern world? Are you comforted by good tile? Would you like to have a modern house on a golf course—kitchen island, breakfast

counter—and live a golf lifestyle with golfing friends of like mind? Would your terrors pursue you into such a house and life? Do you like to pay bills? Do you still answer the phone? Are you fond of country wisdom such as “All the snow in the world won’t change the color of the pine needles”? Is the having of pets salubrious? Were you a bird, would you like more to soar or flap? Can you shoot well? Have you ever had, or do you have now, a soldering kit? Do you have a grasp of pH?

Is there enough time left? Does it matter that I do not specify for what? Was there ever enough time? Was there once too much? Does the notion of “enough time” actually make any sense? Does it suggest we had things to do and could not do them for reasons other than that we were incompetents? Did we have things to do? Things better done than not? Thus, important things? Are there important things? Are we as a species rolling together the great dungball of the importantly done into itself and making thereby a better world for the dungball rollers to follow us?

Would you like to have been a conquistador—perhaps a benign one? Perhaps I mean not a conquistador but merely a world-class explorer and discoverer—would you like to have been one of those?

Or are you content to sit in a chair and fret small, or not fret at all? Is exploring not merely peripatetic dungball rolling up? What about inventing? What about doing anything at all—is it not just making the dungball larger? My question then is, Should we make the dungball larger? Haven't we made the dungball large enough? Did you know that last Wednesday we were to have begun observing the Tertiary Protocols? Are you much disturbed by not knowing what they are, and that our failure to observe them will equal our doom?

Is a man sensing his oncoming death more likely to rid himself of his worldly possessions or cling to them? Does a woman behave, or is a woman expected to behave, any differently from a man in this regard? Do you quite credit that there are *burrowing* owls? Would you like to be a harbormaster? Which venereal diseases have you had? In your view, is a gesture of charity genuine or is it a kind of deep moral tax write-off?

Do you enjoy, as much as I, packing a few effects into a sturdy cowhide suitcase and taking a simple trip? Are you as handsome as you would have it? Would you prefer that the myth of the water skier skiing into a ball of water moccasins not be a myth? Do you

approve of the terrier mentality? Is the sky the limit? Will there be green thoughts in the future? Are you given comfort or made nervous by ball bearings? I have a question for you involving “the velvet raiment of kings”—can you tell me what the question is? Is it late in the day or early in the evening, or is it the top of the morning or the bottom of the night? Is it fair to ask? Are you with me here?

**IF A TORNADO IS** a torrent of wind, is a hurricane a horrent of wind? Wouldn't it be grand to wear a good wool jacket with brass snaps in chilly but not painfully cold weather? Have you ever had to be involved in arbitration? What about traction? Are you well disposed toward bats or are you given the willies? Is it true or is it received hogwash that a meat eater wants a target in his endeavors and a vegetarian eschews a target? Can you picture the excitement of the day that gunpowder was first induced to blow? For tablecloths, do you prefer an oilcloth or an absorbent fabric? On a high-art/low-art scale, where do you put Norman Rockwell?

Can you tell a heron from an egret at long range?

Is there a connection between *tensile strength* and *prehensile tail*? When did navies lose the term “armada”? Will you wear polyester clothes? Is a cupcake sufficient for you, or do you call for another? Are drunks in your view guilty of want of discipline or are they guiltless? What distance is required to stop a motor vehicle going 60 mph on dry pavement? I see “red feathers” and “mud-caked face” and possibly “red feathers on a mud-caked face” but I cannot formulate the question—can you help me with this one?

Have you ever heard The Blind Boys of Alabama? Are you a circusgoer? Do you like to lick stamps? Has there been an American coin as good in its design as the Indian Head penny—unless maybe it is the buffalo nickel, or maybe the Liberty dollar? Do you know what chenille is? Do you keep up with popular music? Do you polish your furniture a lot, a little, or never? Wouldn't you like to have a grape arbor with beehives under it? Should politicians lie? Should mothers and fathers? Should children? Should I? Should you?

Would it be feasible to go to India and not be heard from again? Did you hear about the local couple who drowned in Nova Scotia? Did you know that I knew the man, and that I once saw him wrestle an

emu into the back of a truck by himself, and that I am therefore skeptical that he drowned in Nova Scotia or anywhere else?

If you had the chance, and there weren't the certain prospect of time in court or jail in these our litigious times, wouldn't you like to participate in a rumble? Do you recall precisely how Santa Claus came apart for you? Is belief in Santa Claus, or disbelief, a kind of primer for belief, or disbelief, in God? Do you wear red? Does the having on hand of "spare parts" give you comfort or make you apprehensive a little? Do you feel closer to lizards than to snakes? This contre-temps about children choking on small parts of toys—have children always choked on small parts of toys or have they only recently developed this predilection? Isn't some charity to be extended the telemarketer? Is *orotund* a word? Can the spirits be lifted as, say, a quantity of wet laundry might be lifted, or would they need to be atomized and transported discretely to a higher plane and there recondensed (I am trying to evoke the model of molecular transportation)? Have you seen the expression "Unleashed is unloved"? And "If you love something, set it free"? Do you know the sport of so-called Indian wrestling? Did you know

that I would like to have an early-model Ford and live on a dirt road and almost never check my mailbox for there would be, in this simple life I don't have, almost never any mail in it? Would you like to have such a red-checkered-tablecloth life too?

Would a catastrophic global war be required to restore us to simple living? Do you recall my asking you if you approved of the terrier mentality? And, in certain other words, why dogs don't (as a rule) bite us but monkeys (as a rule) do? May I now ask you if you approve of terriers themselves? Did your mother teach you how to sew? How far out of your way—I mean: you'd go a long distance to an obscure shop and spend a lot of money for it; you'd spend not more than, say, \$50 at a garage sale if you happened to see one; you'd accept it if someone brought it as a gift into your house and set it up completely, with little trees beside it and real smoke coming out of it—would you go to have a model railroad in your house? Do you like fire? If you were to hear the phrase “does harm” in isolation, what might first come to mind?

Do you like feathers? Have you stood on an atoll? Are you familiar with horse tack and rigging? Are you barnyard oriented or is the barnyard a sea of trouble for

you? When you wear white, do you insist it be spotless? Wasn't the world better when the term "haberdasher" was current? For that matter, when butter churns were in use? How did we go so wrong? Wasn't there a day on earth when not every soul was possessed of his or her own petty political and personal-identity agenda? Do you still do candles for your birthday?

Did you not have an uncle who was an artillery engineer in a war? Are you interested in the nuances of grease? Are you for or against canals, in principle? Is it hard for you to credit that dinosaurs *flew*? Do you know the average career length of the top-flight runway model?

Were you a thumb sucker? Would you rather argue with people or not? Can you think of a musical instrument useful in murder other than piano wire? Have you studied the soft toes of geckos? Do you comprehend with complete certainty how bonds work? Would you sail an ocean on a small boat? Do people who purport to know what a fractal is have a leg up on those who confess they don't? If you came upon a party celebrating something or someone with a yellow sheet cake and white icing, would you partake happily? Do you remember the candies called jawbreakers



and Fireballs? Do you have a cutting-edge TV? What dead person would you bring back to life? Do you favor protecting the little wilderness remaining, or do you concede that there is so little left it might as well be ceded to the tide? Would a small red balloon cheer you up? A dog?

Are you fond of facial astringent? Have you ever heard the term, either in the area of philosophy or sex, “eggism”? Among these types of fences—picket, chain-link, and hogwire—which do you find most attractive? Have you ever worn a feather boa? Would you prefer to listen to a trumpet or a saxophone, both played equally well? Do you keep a personal bird count? Do you count calories? Whatever is meant by it, would you say you pad the nest or do not pad the nest? Do you have any formal familiarity with the architecture of arches? Can the slaughter of its own people, either directly (e.g., Byzantine Nike revolt) or indirectly (e.g., American “conflicts”), be regarded a legitimate tool of government? After what age do you think children are ruined by socialization? Given the choice, will you buy bread in a wrapper or not in a wrapper? What to your ear is the best-sounding language? Does the question of where all the gar-

bage goes and how can it not soon not be able to go there bother you? Should I have put that a little more clearly? Will you wear a hat today?

What do you think might happen if “one animal, one vote” were conceived in the animal kingdom? How is it that ancient civilizations become buried over time? Why is oil oily? If you were credited with making a trenchant, lugubrious argument, would you be upset? Do you think there is really that much danger in putting a bird feather in the mouth? Do you prefer calm weather to violent weather? Are you fond of any board games? Does the notion of heresy strike you as serious or laughable? If your neighbors were a brick mason, a cobbler, and a butcher, and you were on good terms with them, would you feel secure in the world and buoyant? Do you grasp the principles of the thermocouple?

If you had a child, would you read to her every night? Do you own good silver? Do you regard yourself a connoisseur of anything? What is the most you have ever donated to a charitable cause, and what was the cause? Have you chosen the way you'd like to die? What profession to your mind most represents grown men being boys? Can you distinguish species of duck