

## Confessions of a Bottle-Sick Novelist

3000 words

Bottlesickness. "A temporary condition (often caused by shaking a bottle) that interferes with a wine's fruit flavors,...alleviated with a few days rest." Wine.com

Dateline: Taos, New Mexico.

One week from completing my six-week fellowship at Wurlitzer Foundation, I woke assailed by doubts and confronted by a severely bottle-sick novel.

And hadn't I been so cocky, just days earlier, burning all the drafts of the manuscript I had brought with me, the husks of friends' readings of my manuscript, their comments in blue and red ink. My fellows and I had decided to celebrate the void of the moon, in the fashion of Taosenos in this season, by lining our adobe wall with *farolitos* (luminaria to the Anglo world) and roasting a lamb. Feeding backcopies of the manuscript to the sacrificial fires seemed right.

Six or seven years had passed in writing this novel. (Who's counting? A beloved nephew, grown from eight to fourteen years old, had stopped asking how it was coming.) To my dismay, I found that I write novels like a painter, adding layers with each successive revision, slowly building up setting, character development, plot and theme. Very slowly...by contrast with my expository writing, which flies off my first longhand drafts into the computer, and after a couple revisions, to publication. Surely a six week fellowship would be sufficient to complete a novel this long in gestation?

To my astonishment, at the end of the first week, under the heady influence of the powerhouse Taos Mountain, I had completed the novel. I announced it to my fellows, to writer friends and family. Of course there was still a lot of cleaning up and revision to do, and yet the novel was complete: dramatic arc, complex characters, beginning, middle and finally, a fitting ending.

Perhaps you can glimpse my own brand of hubris. A self-avowed ritual junky, I am given to the dramatic moment. "Overreaching." Words straight out of Sophocles.

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Shortly before Halloween, I had driven from Berkeley to this six week Taos fellowship, making my way through Navajo and Hopi homelands enlivened by daily ingestion of *majoom*, an invention from the 60's with authentic antecedents in Central Asia. The lightly sauteed *sins emilla*, mixed with chopped nuts and fruit comfit and stuffed into medjool dates, produces a sense of euphoria and a momentous certainty of being synchronous. On time.

Leaving the Grand Canyon in the middle of the night, I drove through forest fires flickering on each side of the road. Stopping at an overlook in a moonless night, I leaned out to feel that yawning space. On the rocks above Moenkopi on the Hopi First Mesa at dawn, I sat looking down at the peaceful village and orderly fields, chimneys sending up fragrant pinon smoke. Everywhere I travelled, local native women fed me chile verde wrapped in fry bread doled out from the back of their cars.

"Where are you going?"

"To Taos, to finish my book."

Clusters of cottonwood marked places where water can be found, their autumn leaves bright as marigold juice, oases laid against this naked landscape, bones of mountains and ruddy skin of mesas exposed to the eye. Can I sustain this charged yet simple existence, I asked myself, translate it into the body of my novel?

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I carried my manuscript with me, together with comments from my first editor, Lois Gilbert, who lives in Santa Fe. After interviewing three editors from the back of Poets and Writers, I had chosen Lois for the same mixed bag of reasons one might choose a horse at the races: at \$3 a page, her price was right. And intuition. Reviewing her comments after her first read, I knew that my hunch had found me a winner.

After arriving in Taos, and with the keys to my casita in hand, I thanked Michael Knight, director of Wurlitzer Foundation, which owns eighteen acres just blocks from the plaza. Surrounded by eight casitas filled with other writers, composers, and artists, I locked myself up in my little adobe house to write.

The main room of my casita was dominated by a baby grand and a corner fireplace. My candelabra of five candles which burn while I write from the middle of the night through the morning, images of The Mother on my hearth, strings of chilis swinging from my portico--all my writing fetishes were settled into their places. Ready

to work, I hefted my worktable over to the generous window facing north, toward Taos Mountain.

I picked uncomfortably at the first thread, the judgment of a fellow writer who had found my male characters sufficiently flawed and compelling and my female characters relatively featureless. My editor Lois Gilbert concurred: my protagonist Catherine Duladier, an earthy woman drawing on her devotion to the Black Madonna and her work in the silk, was too good to be true. Go back to first principles of creating protagonists, she advised, urging me to make Catherine seduce her best friend Regina, an attraction I had toyed with. "Let them be bad," Lois opined. "Let them stray from husbands and vows. Let all this subterranean sexual tension erupt into action."

Compelling characters must yearn for something out of reach; desire can define a character. Yes, the advice that Lois distilled rang true to me: Catherine must "be spurred into action by her desire, even if it's self-destructive action." I knew it must be done, but how?—I was as much of a coward as my protagonist Catherine! In this emotional minefield, I chose the time-honored retreat: I announced that the two women had become lovers, offstage, Euripedes'-style.

Drawing on her quaking heart as well as her superior store of millennial silk wisdom, Catherine laid down rules for her new lover. They must observe the taboo against sexual congress during their month working together in the pressurecooker of the new silkworm operation.

Within days of their beginning work, the *magnanerie* (the place

where silkworms are raised) becomes a hell on earth, as the Black Madonna tests her new *maitresse* with nightmares, with unbounded lust, with the violent death of part of her brood of silkworms. This trying condition--I reassured my readers--was not occasioned by Catherine and Regina's illicit lovemaking, which honored their earthy if sometimes destructive patroness, the Black Madonna, but from an imbalance. Disharmony sourcing from...what?

Ask the universe a question; get an answer. During that first week of my fellowship, Pax Christi hosted a talk by Daniel Berrigan's wife Liz McAllister, during which she handed me my character development tool: "Love and truth must go together; love without truth is violence." Within hours, I had Regina confront Catherine with the revelation that she couldn't thrive while lying about their love. They wrestled with it and with each other. Conveniently, as the worms spun themselves into their cocoons, Regina died, neatly sidestepping their moment of truth. I really didn't want to complete my book in the aftermath of their revealing themselves as lovers to their nineteenth century community!

With my protagonist's tragic flaw firmly in hand-- a coward in love, she lies to herself first about everything that matters--I flew through the revision, bolstered by the energy from the mountain that makes Taos a power center. I sent off my crowing email: I've completed the novel. After one week.

Do we hear the faint strains of a parallel between the author and her protagonist, that breath of hubris? Avoiding the recognition of emotional cowardice with trumpeting fanfare?

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Thanksgiving and I sent off another check for a second read along with my revised manuscript to Lois before boarding a plane back to

Berkeley. We were aligned: Lois would hand off her comments on the manuscript to me in Santa Fe, on my way back to Taos and the final two weeks of my fellowship. Plenty of time to polish the novel, before sending out letters to prospective agents.

My brother Brian, a lifetime editor in journalism, advised me to write jacket copy, an exercise he recommends before pitching agents. Channeling Lois, I shot this email back to him: "I can't write jacket copy or a letter to agents, until I know what my novel is about."

I've completed the novel but I don't know yet what it's about? I know a lot!...Catherine, silvery cool and slender, bites her nails and obsesses about details while missing the big picture: she is slightly nearsighted. Regina, red-haired and voluptuous, passionate about abetting escaping slaves, has a deep belly laugh that can be heard across an acre of pasture. Catherine smokes a clay pipe, sighs a little too loudly when her husband plays the fiddle, and tosses in bed at night, thinking about Regina.

Naturally people ask me what the novel is about; I'm becoming confounded. Is it really about a group of Huguenot silkwormers who come to Bucks County in the late 1830's to transplant their reputation for producing fine silk to the new world? I mulled over the questions that inspired me to start this book. Can I dramatize how the women of both native American and native European cultures lose power they previously possessed, a loss that will persist for a century and a half? How can I anatomize this nursery of highminded ideals and unbridled greed that will come to characterize our grown-up nation? Can I pull these themes through the scaffolding of story without becoming a haranguing fishwife?

Lois and I met on Canyon Road, a road of galleries and restaurants that was still unpaved when I lived here with my Jules-and-Jim *menage* in 1968. Lois, a slender woman in her early fifties, is chiefly notable for a certain glint in her eye. Lois socked it to me: she sees no scar in Catherine, no loss, no initiation in pain at the beginning of the book. I have to wound my protagonist while she's young and innocent: she has to suffer. Bad things have to happen that haunt her through the book, so she can be healed.

Further, she easily persuaded me, the seduction between Regina and Catherine has to be written, in detail on the page, to parallel a sex scene with that "touch of the barnyard" that Lois admired, one between Catherine and her husband Philip towards the end of the book.

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Returning to my casita, I wrote the seduction scene, ending Catherine and Regina's prolonged flirtation. Now I had to admit something profoundly embarrassing for a writer who fancies herself a woman of the world. Aside from some girls' school adolescent fantasy-fumbles and some heartbreaking crushes on camp counsellors, I had never made love with a woman. Well, I reasoned, I have made love to myself.

Thus armed against charges of fraud, I turned to face the challenge of giving my young protagonist a serious sexual wound. I couldn't see the maiden Catherine willingly submitting to sex with two men from the prestigious *parfumerie* in Grasse, who had engaged her to help them pursue the early science of pheromones. Lois and I concurred: it would have to involve drugs. This is her first sexual experience, after all; though she's self-described as "overripe,"

she's not loose. *Yet.*

After enjoying her, the two fragrance scientists should dismiss her with contempt. A double wounding. Moreover, wouldn't she enjoy much of it herself? She has not been raped and victimized as much as initiated sexually, a gift from the bloody Black Madonna. A violent and ritualized initiation, yes, but she has been awakened and set on the path of the hero's quest for self-discovery. The cost to her has been high, creating the opportunity for a triple wounding. The family's investor has lost significant money as a consequence of her time in Grasse. Word goes out of the "appearance of impropriety."

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Life goes on, as it does: her family stands behind her, and several years later, with Catherine at the helm, the family immigrates to launch their new venture. And yet her reputation is "besmirched", her spirit shamed and humiliated. Feeling that "she brought it on herself," she hides the wound and lives the lie. Until Regina arrives to heal her.

That night, as I lay in a light sleep, turning over the possibilities of inflicting this wound on my eighteen year old protagonist, I am jolted awake repeatedly by sharp violent orgasms, the natural result of this or that scene I am imagining, a night that does nothing to relieve the growing lust that continues to build during my long sessions concocting this brew.

"December 4, 2005," my journal reads. "I rise at three o'clock this morning and write the "wounding" scene in longhand, then coax myself back to sleep the only way possible at this point--with my vibrator. All this writing, writing about sex, about wounds. I can't

wait to be done with this book; it's making me sick...getting up at 3 or 4 am, writing until 8 or 9 at night, with one break during the day for a walk, some socializing, a meal."

Reluctantly, I concur with Lois: too many subplots distract from the central thrust of the novel. I slash many vibrant well-written scenes, ruthless with my body/my self, ruthless with the manuscript.

"It hurts," I write. "This stuff is important to me. What about all the fine writing I worked over, honing the language with the tools of poetry? My cursor and delete button run over pages of scenes cutting, cutting. The novel is bottlesick; I am bottlesick. So much of it torn and blasted...introductions to characters lost, text disjointed. And so much of the writing raw and new, another overlay on the body of my novel. I'm close to exhausted with it. And fearful of what people--my family!--will think. I can't give interviews," I rave to myself. "If I do, I'll have to refuse to talk about the sex scenes or let anyone get personal."

Where would we be, trapped in a purgatory of our devising, without our journals? "I finish my writing day, after reviewing and revising the sex, the yearning, the wounding, and I am ill and agitated and horny in such a base way, I have to take myself to bed and make love to myself yet again, and hope that I can be gentle when I am feeling so savage. The writing is pulling things out of me that sicken and exhaust me.

"I'm too old for this," I tell myself.

"No, you're not," I answer.

I turn to put out the light, perchance to sleep. "What are those two carrots doing on my bedstand?" I ask.

"What do you think?" I answer, one eyebrow cocked.

With a sigh, I take the carrots one by one and stroke them with Astrolube. Jerking my casita curtains closed, I shake my head and settle back on the pillows, while the writer--ever the voyeur--clocks each sensation for tomorrow's session with the computer.

My youngest daughter calls me. I tell her what Lois has said, Lois the imperious leatherclad editor. "Are you sure what you're doing is right?" my daughter, also a writer, asks. "Yes." We both agree: it does feel right. "You're killing your darlings," she observes soberly.

I write Lois a short email report.

"The novel is so bottle-sick right now I don't think I can work on it anymore. (What if I've killed it?) "

Lois shoots back:

"Over and over on the way home from Canyon Road I wailed at myself, 'Why couldn't you keep your mouth shut??!!'"

"Because your manuscript is so good I fall in love with my own hunches about how it should be, that's why, and the characters come alive in me and I want to steer them around and make them talk and do terrible things to each other and then wake from their own miseries and find forgiveness, and new life.

You make me trespass all my editorial boundaries, and I'm deeply apologetic about that and yet the whole process made me feel energized, too, so I'm not really sorry at all."

"As for the book," she prophesizes, "it's amazing, how UN-effortful writing can be, and how the most knotty problems can be resolved when we leave them alone. You haven't killed it. It will clarify. All it needs is rest, and time."

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The cottonwood leaves are down, crunching underfoot, as I stuff my hands into my full-length red coat and stride towards Taos Mountain. The sky is a marvel of filtered light and depth of atmosphere, the brightness of the day belying the freezing temperature. Taos Mountain, She of the Uncompromising Stare, is dusted with snow. The tang of pinon smoke curling up from the chimneys sharpens my senses.

I walk, as if through an invisible labyrinth, not-thinking, the rhythm of the cold air going in and out of my lungs, the crunch of the hard dirt under my feet, the rasp of a raven rowing through the sky above my head.

After sunset, I sink into the blessing of being in Taos, eat chili rellenos, munch *biscochitos* , join the throng around bonfires at the lighting of Le Doux street. I run into old friends I had been hoping to see, their dear faces lit by *ferolitos* , luminous lines punctuating walls and curbs, celebrating the coming Winter Solstice.

Bouyant as a bubble, rising up from the sediment and yeast inside me that's been stirred, comes clarity. Though this novel may not be the one I thought I was writing, I am ready to write that jacket copy.

Finally, I know: I'm writing a novel about a woman who draws on the power of the feminine divine, to forgive herself for the wounds of her past in the balm of a healing love. And more: Burning Silk is not only a book about the healing power of the Black Madonna or bisexual love but also a more unconventional story. In the same fires that test the women, Catherine's husband Philip has grown, becoming their equal in emotional honesty and capacity to love.

On the threshold of leaving Taos and the hermetic seal of my writing fellowship, I comb through the manuscript, sunk into that final meditation I've heard other novelists describe: reading scenes aloud to hear the resonance of each word, tightening characterizations, recalibrating dialogue to "true."

I have earned being the author of Burning Silk, submitting myself to the same forge and anvil that have made my characters' hearts malleable. We walk together at a human pace, breath and heartbeat, pulse and drum.