

Excerpt from the novel, Burning Silk

The tension has been building between Regina, firebrand of the Quaker community and apprentice in the silk enterprise, and Catherine, the maitresse de la soie. It's spring of 1840, both are happily married women with children, and yet...

The day before going into the magnanerie together to raise silkworms over the next month, the two women become lovers.

Catherine had sent Regina a terse message. "We go en magnanerie in two days. Can we go out for a walk today?"

Before the morning was half gone, Regina had arrived, her hair unbound, her feet shod in sensible mocassins.

As Catherine sat on the front steps changing her own shoes, giving last instructions to her sister before leaving Lischen for the day, Elisabeth gave her sister an unsettling look, asking, "Do you have everything you need?"

Catherine was so filled with Regina's presence, a symphony of sensation, that she make sense of Elisabeth's words, could barely hear her. She saw her sister's narrowed eyes, simply saw her sister's mouth move. "Yes," she said, "Yes."

"Are you sure?" Elisabeth said, both aloud and in Dialog.

"We're sure," Regina answered. She took the woven bag that Elisabeth handed out the door, packed with blanket and jug of water, and slung it over her shoulder. Neither turned back to wave although the door had already slammed shut.

Regina and Catherine headed downhill, passed Marguerite's. Relieved that no one was in the yard, forcing on them the obligation of pleasantries, they followed the path they were familiar with, beyond Marguerite's, along Nishaminy Creek, and then—where the path turned away from the creek—they stopped. They didn't speak at all, not caring to dilute their feelings nor willing to speak what might be spoiled with words. Regina had heard about the place they were heading, she had said, far beyond the community swim hole.

Catherine followed Regina when they left the path, striking out obliquely across the forest floor.

Will we be glad we have a blanket? Catherine thought nervously, her mind shutting down at picturing anything beyond walking side by side, then single file, behind Regina, who was following a deer path.

Regina seemed different in the woods, wild like a wood sprite. She had let her hair free just for the occasion of being alone with Catherine, away from social expectations. Apart from her appearance, Catherine thought, Regina stepped through the woods like a native, quietly, efficiently and purposefully, stopping frequently to listen. Regina held back brambles and thorn apple branches for Catherine to pass, lest they snap back and wound her. Both women kept their eyes averted from each other, aside from a nervous smile and “thank you,” courtesies of pathfinder and follower. An altogether appropriate gravity had settled on each of them, as if they wanted to transcend their historical time and place to meet each other's essence.

They stopped abruptly, having reached a pool created by a small avalanche of rocks.

“Here it is,” Regina said. The creek chuckled through the rocks along a new route; here and there they could see ripple and tail of a large trout where hatches of flies dimpled the surface of the water.

Setting the bag down, Regina squatted down beside the pool, and, leaving room for Catherine beside her, trailed her hand through the water, sending schools of minnows fluttering to the shelter of subterranean rocks.

“Is it cold?” Catherine asked.

“Divine,” Regina answered, standing and beginning to unbutton her clothing.

“Marguerite said there’s a small thermal spring that comes out of the rockslide, warming the pool.” The day was unseasonably mild for April, and here—in the small clearing created by the pool—birds sang and chased each other, even while rustles and snaps told the women that other creatures drew back into the protection of the deeper woods.

Catherine sat on the mossy bank and, undoing her high button boots, drew her feet out of them with a sigh.

Stepping out of her skirts and petticoat, and drawing her arms out of her chemise, Regina flung her remaining clothing behind her like a discarded skin, and with a “whoop!” jackknifed into the air, then slid under the water in a long pale trajectory.

Catherine had a fleeting impression of a pennant of red hair, wintery and glowing skin (her bum’s cant and swell) and the heavy breasts that she had imagined, frozen in an arabesque in the air before Regina disappeared. Catherine wiggled her feet in the chilly water, remembering the silver sword initiation she and Elisabeth had gone through, under their mother’s direction, which happened of necessity in a cold mountain spring. The loud explosion of Regina surfacing sent water spraying as far as Catherine’s feet. She grinned at the nymph who emerged, blowing water.

“Are you coming in?” Regina asked, throwing diamond droplets of water from her unbound hair into the air. Water sluiced down the gully between her breasts, pearled with drops and dimpled with gooseflesh.

Neither of us knows what should happen next, Catherine thought.

Regina, who dove underwater, surfaced by Catherine, and taking her foot in hand, kissed her arch, never taking her eyes from Catherine’s. “Come in, *lieblich*.” she invited, “the

water's fine," and she presented Catherine with a view of her legs, back and buttocks as she dove away like a dolphin.

Remembering how much Philip liked to see her undress slowly, Catherine raised her skirt, letting her petticoat frame Regina's view of her garters at the top of her thighs and the glint of her flaxen pubic hair between her legs, so gilded against the black cotton lisle stockings she had specially chosen for today, thinking of this moment. She knew how her small breasts lifted as she raised her arms high to slip off blouse and chemise, how slowly unbuttoning each of the dozen buttons running down the front of her skirt set Philip to humming beneath his breath. Then, letting her skirt and petticoat slip off her hips, she bent again to give Regina a view of her breasts silhouetted behind her buttocks as she stepped out of each stocking. Rather than throw herself into the pond beside Regina, she stepped in, reaching down and splashing water on her breasts, so that her nipples stood out, long and rosy. She gave Regina a most provocative grin, before she dove in to the breathtakingly chilly water. And for a moment, one blissful moment, she was alone, a wild naead, enjoying the sensation of her body—pure and unencumbered as a blade—slicing through the thin blue silk of fresh water to the wavering pale columns of Regina's thighs.

She surfaced in front of Regina. They joined hands, wanting to pit their strength against each other, each trying to bring the other into the water. Then Catherine feinted, pulling Regina under with her and, from a tangle of arms and legs, they delighted for a moment, seeing each other in a new element, before exploding to the surface again, mouths and hair streaming with fresh water.

Still they didn't speak, wanting to extend this moment and their timelessness, their mythic personas exposed to each other's gaze.

No one has seen me like this, they said to each other, in Dialog.

Then Regina circled Catherine's waist with her arm and pulled her down again into the water. This time they studied each other closely, waving hair and arms, the evidence of

their womanhood—glinting pubic triangles, bouyant breasts, shadowy slices of navel—their distorted mouths blowing quicksilver bubbles.

They burst to the surface again and Regina was quicker, turning Catherine in the crook of her arm so she was trapped, arms pinned to her sides, her buttocks pressed into Regina's belly.

“We are well matched, madame mermaid,” Regina whispered into Catherine's ear.

“Though I am a bit taller, you are stronger than I imagined.”

Catherine struggled for a moment, continuing the game, and then allowed her legs and hips to drift back, unmoored, between Regina's. “You imagined me?” Catherine asked.

“Yes!” Regina hissed. “Damn your pretenses: you know I have.”

Catherine twisted out of Regina's grip, and wrapping her legs around Regina's waist, turned over onto her back, her hair floating. “Your breasts are just as I imagined them,” she said, “heavy, ivory, with blue veins.” With these words, she cupped one hand under one of Regina's breasts and shuddered, as a moment imagined repeatedly became reality. She observed Regina for a long moment, then she ran her hand lazily down one of Regina's breasts, stopping just short of her nipple, which was sharp, hard, and puckered. *Could I tease it out?* she thought just as her mouth covered Regina's nipple and her hand floated between Regina's legs, fluttering, opening, discovering Regina's delicate anemone membranes.

Catherine floated her body out lengthwise on the surface of the water, pulling Regina's torso over her mouth, so that the weight and heft of Regina's breast hung like a bell over Catherine's face.

Regina stroked down Catherine's hips, cradling her, then reaching from behind, found and parted her labia.

Catherine let go of Regina's nipple with a groan. “What do we do?”

Regina rotated Catherine to her feet, taking the opportunity to enjoy the curve of Catherine's buttocks. "I haven't the slightest idea." He head jerked toward the bank. "Shall we find out?"

Catherine laughed and pulled her friend by one hand across the small pond, while Regina explored between Catherine's buttocks, amazed to find Catherine convulsing around her fingers.

"Are you like this with Philip?" she asked, as they snapped the blanket in the air between them.

"No," Catherine said, without judgment. "It's harder. I almost never give it...here," she said, her fingers parting her pubic hair, exposing the pink "lentil" of pleasure.

Regina went onto her knees before Catherine, reaching out her fingers; Catherine knelt down across from her, saying, "We haven't even kissed."

Regina leaned into the space between them, her breasts swinging, and grabbed Catherine's bottom lip between her teeth. "You bitch," she said softly, cupping Catherine's breast with her hand. "You beautiful bitch," she said, tweaking that maddening nipple, hard.

"Ah!" Catherine's head arched back, neck stretching, body a bow for the arrow of pure delight; "Let me look at you, Regina," Catherine said, gleefully, her every expression—flaring nostrils, sparkling eyes, and wicked grin—spelling a readiness to play. She pushed Regina down on the blanket, eyes narrowing. "No. I want to see you against the moss."

Regina lifted her hips and Catherine threw the blanket to the side.

"Your hair is paler between your legs than on your head. Strawberry blonde." Catherine used the words to lever herself between Regina's legs and part them. The effect against the green moss was startling. Her finger gently parted Regina's labia. Her clitoris was the

size of a pea, and engorged, the hood like a strange dragon ruffle. She bent, tasted; Regina's clit pulsed beneath her lips. "You taste like oysters."

Regina's eyes fluttered, her hands clutching at the protuberant roots of the tree they lay beneath.

Catherine bent her head again, slipping her finger into Regina's vagina, sliding it along the backside where Catherine knew her own most intense sensations resided, pulling down against the perineum, stroking in and out while her tongue, lips and teeth found the size, rhythm and root of Regina's sweetpea.

Regina neither bucked nor howled as Catherine did when Philip worked at bringing her to orgasm, yet Catherine could feel the engorgement, following it with her hand from inner thigh up across Regina's belly, around to her buttocks. Regina stiffened against Catherine's face and mouth, pressing herself to Catherine as her body filled and flooded. Regina's juices filled Catherine's mouth.

Perhaps time passed. Certainly clouds drifted overhead, caught in the net of tree branches.

"Where are all the animals?" Catherine breathed. "It's so quiet." From being spooned together, Catherine eased herself onto her back, still maintaining contact with Regina's body along its whole length, both because she wanted to feel the shock of Regina's skin and because their contact generated a heat that was intensely pleasurable. Catherine wondered if someone could be watching them from the shadows of the brake at the edge of the clearing around the pond. The thought of someone watching lit Catherine like it always did.

Regina came up on her elbow and, bending over Catherine, kissed her, fully, deeply, stroking her head while she drank the nectar of their combined essence.

"Now you," she said, and laughed at the shiver that ran the length of Catherine's body at the suggestion of Regina's teasing imagination. "Humor me, Catherine," she said, looking

around the clearing for the props she envisioned. “I want you over here. No,” she said, as Catherine prepared to lie down on the hummock Regina indicated, under a hemlock with lowhanging branches. “I want you to squat here. Hold onto that branch in front of you, for balance.” Regina stepped back, circled slowly around Catherine, taking in every angle. “This is how I want you.”

“What natural wantons we are,” Catherine said, head thrown back, eyes snapping.

Regina slid between her lover’s legs, facie up. She slowly and deliberately pressed Catherine’s knees outward, never taking her eyes from her lover’s.

As the air struck Catherine’s clitoris, she gasped, imagining the mouth to follow. She looked down at Regina’s head between her legs, her full lips, and convulsed, once, hard. “Aah,” she growled, deep in her throat.

Regina arched her torso so Catherine could feel her lover’s breasts grazing her bum. Regina licked her finger and slowly augured it into Catherine’s anus.

“Oh!” Catherine’s eyes went dark, her thighs shuddered.

Regina stroked Catherine’s thighs open, then slipped just the tip of her finger between Catherine’s labia, which resembled a fresh mushroom viewed from below, silvery-pink gills hung beneath the cap. Regina lifted her head, tasting. “Oh you!--- earthy mushroom, you witch, you weasel...” Regina continued her litany of names between sucks and nibbles. “...cunt, quincunx, quince...” Regina moaned. “...ocean, pomegranate, piece!” She emphasized this last word with a slap on Catherine’s butt, then used her tongue like a finger.

Catherine was afraid, afraid her guts would fall out between her legs, afraid she would urinate in her lover’s face, afraid she would burst blood vessels as the pressure and swelling grew unbearable. “Stop!” she cried.

“Dance for me, Catherine,” Regina said savagely, holding Catherine’s buttocks in each of her hands, stroking over them, so that Catherine began to dance, moving her hips to temple drums only Regina could hear as she flicked, flicked. “Give it, Catherine,” she said, “give it,” while her hands and mouth took the story that Catherine danced.

Catherine convulsed, convulsed, convulsed, blind to the world, a seer brought gratefully through to the other side. Larger, much larger. *I have been a coward*, Catherine thought, falling asleep beside this great red-haired Viking of a woman who had brought her home.

Not alone, Catherine said in Dialog.

No, not alone, Regina answered

Later:

Your skin is so silky, after.

Yours too.

Pause.

Is it because we have the silk in our blood? Or do all women have it?

Pause.

I don’t know.

“Tell me a story, Catherine. Something from your life so I can know you better.” Regina lay spread out beneath “their tree” on the moss as if she sprang from it.

Catherine sputtered with laughter. “Isn’t that how our seduction began?” She rose up on her elbow and let her hair drift down into her lover’s face.

“Have you ever told the story of Camargue to anyone,” Regina asked her. “You know, the real story.”

“Of course not,” Catherine answered, still teasing.

“Tell it to me now.”

Catherine thought a moment, then asked, “How old were you when you left the Mississippi delta?”

“Nouvelle Orleans? Ten or so. Why?”

“This is a young girl’s delta story,” Catherine said. “And I am going to tell it to your delta.” She swiveled on her hips and, laying her head on Regina’s stomach, touched the spot she knew how to find so well with her index finger, there in the thicket of Regina’s fiery vulva. “Listen carefully.”

“You have all my attention,” Regina giggled. “Just don’t whisper. I want to hear you too.”

“There,” Catherine touched down with her finger, “where the Rhone meets the Mediterranean in a delta worthy of Her name, grasslands without limit and wetlands rich with birds,” she intoned, kissing Regina’s belly.

“There.” Regina sucked in air as Catherine touched down again, “Where *les gardians* raise black bulls for the Spanish Plaza del Toros, where wild white horses allow *les gardians* to ride their broad backs on their rounds of Camargue. Men and women alike, *les gardians* in their broadbrimmed black hats, carry tridents, symbol of their ancient majesty, symbol of Poseidon who rules this watery land.”

Regina wiggled her hips. “We love this story.”

“There,” Catherine pressed her lips down where her finger had been drilling and Regina made a sound in her throat, “where this herd of mystical beasts who feed on seaweed and small creatures,” Regina squealed in mock alarm. “...who inhabit the brine along the littoral zone...” Catherine lowered her head and blew softly, then turned and looked sweetly at Regina. “...bear black colts who turn white as they grow into adulthood, sires whose manes are never clipped or braided, mares whose tails are silky and thick.”

Catherine flipped back her hair from her face. “Oh Regina—I can’t go on. This is killing me.”

“You are a coward,” Regina said and Catherine bent back to her story.

“Here, on the strip of sand that rings Camargue,” she intoned, as if she were a small child

reciting lines on a stage, “is situate the delta’s only public settlement, analog to a woman’s clitoris at floodtime, Sainte Marie de la Mer, sacred to Madonna Negra,”

“Stop, you’re ruining it.” Regina sat up and moved over to place her back against the tree. “I want this story for myself,” she announced.

Catherine rolled over on her belly, pulling the blanket straight under her. “Draw up your knees then, and I will continue.”

Regina wrapped her arms around her knees, and laid her head on her arms, ready to listen and oblige Catherine at the same time.

“You know, Regina, this is a view we never get to see of ourselves.” Regina nodded, her eyes sparkling. “You’re ravishing.” Then, with an impatient gesture from Regina, Catherine continued: “All right: here my family and I—les Duladiers---gather with the gypsies and *les gardians*, vintners and silkraisers on an annual pilgrimage into the long sandbar of the sea, accompanying the childsize boat the Madonna gave us, that reposes in the small church here by the sea.

“Our ancestors told us only that the boat must be wet in the sea each year and so we do—we wet the boat that year that we go, in strange company, a Noah’s ark, a babel of unified people whose hearts sing in Her name.”

“You only go once?”

“Yes, at the same time that we made the pilgrimage to Sainte Marie de la Mer, we also visited the sites of resistance and persecution of our people, known to others as the shadow people, the Huguenots.”

Catherine continued, stroking, drawing Regina’s fire.

“A gypsy, who fingers her exquisite garnet necklace from Romany, offers to read my cards. I don’t ask why she chooses me, but, shivering with excitement, I slip away from

my family and follow her down the beach to their permanent encampment.

“I am blind to the low room, the beaded curtain, the thick incense that hangs in the air. She holds me in thrall, directing what I see by channeling where I look. She holds my fear in the cup of her hand so I will not have to hold it, and I am grateful to her, proud of myself.

“I shuffle the deck and cut it, following her instructions.

“She shows me the top card in the deck. It sits in the middle of the table between us, the Hanging Man. Upside down, bound, calm. Twisting in the wind.

“This is you, she tells me in Dialog.

“I recognize one of my alternative futures. *I know,* I reply. *How do I get out of it?* I ask. *Or is it my fate?*

She smiles, speaking with her eyes. She lifts a sheaf of my hair in her hand, admiring the color. *A rare metal,* she says, *neither silver nor gold.*

“You want my hair?” I say aloud.

She shakes her head, laughing.

What do I have to give you to help me? I ask in Dialog. What would it be worth, I ask myself.

You must give yourself to my brother. A small sacrifice.

“A curtain opens and a fat dark young man...”

“Stop it!” Regina scrambled to her feet. She put her hands over her ears. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“You asked,” Catherine said. “Nothing happened to me. I got out of it.”

“How old were you?” Regina yelled, grabbing Catherine’s arm and twisting it.

“Ow! I was twelve.”

Regina stepped in close to Catherine. “Does every one of your stories that you don’t tell anyone but me involve your sexual exploits?” She pushed Catherine who fell. Regina

leaped on Catherine, closing her mouth with a kiss that was more predatory than amorous. Catherine fought back fiercely and then surrendered to the sweet flood of their first fight. *Regina is jealous.* Then later: *What will I tell Philip about these scratches and bites?*

Regina persuaded Catherine to go back into the chilly water and then to coat herself with the clay that lay exposed along one bank. “It will be good for your skin. You’ll see: you won’t have any bruises. I’ll send over some of my comfrey ointment if you don’t have any. It will heal these bramble gashes overnight.” She grinned and began kissing and licking the scratches they had made on each other’s skin, saying, “Roses. Roses,” alternating kissed and bites.

As they were dressing, Regina gave Catherine more insight into their neighbors’ motives for supporting the Duladier silk project.

“Catherine, we have done our work,” Regina said, drawing on a black lisle stocking and snapping it into place with a garter. “We’ve looked at the books of silk operations further to the south in Lancaster. It is clear to us,” she said, working her foot into her boot, “that owning a string of successful silk magnaneries will bankroll our important projects...” she grunted as she swung up to her feet. “..from the manumission of slaves to helping them establish themselves as free men and women.” She gestured at the two of us. “To the enfranchisement of women! And don’t even ask me how money would help our cause—start businesses, build manufactories. Help women who are being beaten start a new life with their children.” She was putting her hair up, talking with pins clenched between her teeth. “Putting an end to war and violence.” She began to pace, as she always did when her ideas became too much for her to hold.

To keep from flinging herself onto Regina, Catherine muttered banalities. “You folks have no lack of vision; no one can fault you for that.”

Regina whirled on Catherine, a glorious Valkyrie. “Visions cost money to put into

practice, just to send delegates to Washington. We would like to fund larger tracts of land for the Lenape, but so far, the Lenape have refused to become large landowners. Maybe they don't trust us. Marguerite is working on it, but..."

Catherine launched her raft onto Regina's torrent and found that it carried her. "Oh yes, the Quakers are swept up in the possibility of making a fortune. But if we were talking about the Merino sheep that caused so much excitement more than a decade ago, they would be listening more carefully. I warrant you, Regina, it's something about the silk!" She whispered, "There *is* a demon in silk, Regina, and they know it."

That brought Regina up cold. She stood pleating her damp dress between her fingers, a sure sign that she was considering Catherine's points, that they resonated with her as well.

Catherine went in for the kill. "Besides sheep is men's work, and spinning wool can be done around the hearth while stirring the pot and nursing the child. Admit it, Regina! These men and women don't like what is implied here."

"What, Catherine?"

Catherine would not lose her patience on the day when they had known each other fully for the first time, ending an aching that had become intolerable and initiating an aching that might finally break both their hearts.

Although Catherine was feeling brutal, Regina knew her well enough to see how the maitresse used her breath as bellows to achieve the successful result: her apparent calm. Their intimacy was becoming the most important school in the ways of *la soie* for Regina.

"The month in the magnanerie," Catherine stated the obvious. "A month apart from the world. It's too...what? It flies in the face of their comfortable notions of our places in the world, men in the field, women by the hearth, spinning with their hands and rocking the cradle with one foot, while the next meal bubbles on the hearth."

“Our men are our best allies,” Regina said stoutly.

“Then why have they asked you to work to free the slaves first and then, then, they will work with you to get women the vote?” Catherine blew out air, shifted to her other foot. “In fact, it’s the men’s inattention that stings me most. *I am the magnanarelle*, I want to shout at them. I have no way of making either men or women here understand that silk is a science, precise and precarious.”

“Catherine, you’re pacing and pounding one hand into the other,” Regina said mildly. “Am I going to be a bad influence on you?”

Catherine stopped and faced Regina. “The worms propose a contract that is rigorous, yes, and will result---if followed---in a cash crop: silk. It’s so bloody simple.” All the anger had drained out of her.

Regina stepped over to the tree, picked up the pack loaded with blanket and jug, and gestured toward home. “I’ve offered you everything that I am, Catherine. It should be enough.”

Catherine followed Regina out of the woods, thinking, Mother created a special place for me to think about what had happened in Camargue. I was younger than Kristiana. She made me tell her everything, over and over. “I don’t see the Hanging Man in your future,” she finally said to me. But I sat in that special place for years before she released me.

With that thought, Catherine resolved not to hold Regina responsible for the behavior of the Quaker community any longer. *I release you*, she said in Dialog to Regina’s retreating back.

I won’t permit it, Regina replied, without breaking stride.