

This love scene comes three quarters of the way through Burning Silk. Regina has died of yellow fever. The worms can finally be left, spinning into their cocoons. Now it is the privilege and duty of the maitresse to “spin” with her consort, who she has not lain with in over a month. Philip and Catherine go apart while the others mourn Regina. Catherine invites Regina to possess her body, for one last night of enjoyment before she leaves this world, as loving as necrophilia has ever been.

The first few sucks on each breast were painful but I bore them as a sharp reminder of life. Lisbeth-the-smaller pinched my breasts with her free hand, rebuking me for my withdrawal. *Now I will have to work!* she seemed to say. I looked down at her stern face, so thunder-browed for a baby—*Mother!*--and imitated her look, as she earnestly sucked. She couldn't help herself, laughed, lost her grip, blowing milky bubbles, before returning to her pleasure with a lightened expression, stroking me tenderly with forgiveness. *Our harmony is so easily restored*, I thought.

Killy made a daisy chain for me, a newly acquired skill. The smell of strawberry flowers filled the air with the promise of bright fruit to follow. A flock of bluebirds lilted by to the orchard.

The magnanerie below was on its own, spinning its message to all of us who mourned. Lisbeth continued to play at punishing me, greedy as a worm in the Fifth Age, slapping my breasts smartly with flat baby palms, biting my nipple in between great gulps, flashing her eyes at me.

“Oh, Lischen!” I laughed at her antics and baby revenge. She paused, without letting go the nipple and grinned, then returned to her business, stroking my free breast with

a proprietary hand.

Killy hummed while he worked, telling me about the stream behind the pavilion. Telling me how Lischen loved the water. How he watched her like a hawk.

I moved my mind to a spot above us. *Strange how we can experience perfection in the midst of death, completion in the wake of savage sacrifice*, I thought. I remembered to place that in my notes. I put my treacherous thoughts about burning the cocons, destroying the silk, into the cupboard, empty now, the same cupboard I had put Regina in when she lay dying, into the cupboard that now lay full with no thing-ness.

The afternoon, long and golden, nonetheless came to an end. I had touched Moritz' arm, held his hand, asked to be let into his eyes and to his grief coffered there, to communicate mine. *No words are needed. You are held in the arms of the Madonna, I pray*, though he hasn't heard me.

Hubert had somehow made it back from seminary, a shrunken husk. He looked at no one, spoke with no one. All could see that he was consumed with guilt, imperishable fuel in the fire of his grief. *Losing a wife and son; there's a grief can last a lifetime.*

Wilhelm and Elisabeth came out of the Meeting Hall together, paused to speak with Moritz, stroked little Eugenia's hair lovingly. Kristiana and Catya drew near to them, all three women thirsting for the normalcy of their everyday life.

I am ready to forgive, I said in Dialog but then Mother's voice came through, Mother and who else?: *It will never be. He is cursed and shunned.*

Elisabeth flinched.

Catya and Kristiana joined hands, drifting away from their father.

It was then that I understood for the first time that Wilhelm could hear Dialog. The pain of knowledge reached his eyes, and he held his hands out to Kristiana, *of all people*, before he turned, stumbling, heading down the hill to the tavern, where the coach would come.

Kristiana was gone like a flash, down the hill thirty degrees from her father, to Marguerite's.

Philip's eyes search me out, his heart, eyes, hands hungry.

"Come, Killy!" Elisabeth says with a seductive smile on her face. "Wait until you see what the Quaker women have prepared for our communal supper. And Eugenia will be there too." Eugenia smiles shyly at Killy, revealing her shock to him with one darting glance of her eyes, a plea. He goes to her side and staunchly puts his arm around her.

My son.

"Look what I made for you, Eugenia," he says, quick as a swallow to change course. He places the wreath, measured to my head earlier, on Eugenia, creating an occasion to look into her eyes again. "And for Mama," he says.

My heart lurches. *He made two.* I kneel while he slips the circlet over my head where it sits against my washed and braided corona, done by Elisabeth for me this noon, while the lentil soup.... After...when? After, while Catya and Kristiana watched.

I am in shock.

Yes. You are cared for. Relax.

Lischen is completely unconscious, her mouth fully open, head loose on her neck. Elisabeth-the-greater, my only sister, takes my only daughter from me carefully.

Philip does not try to hide his hunger as he looks at my unbound breasts, runs his eyes over my face and neck. He slips his hand around my waist, drawing me off, thinking he knows what is his to claim.

Behind us Elisabeth calls, “Catya! Check the fires in the magnanerie and then come. The funeral supper is waiting.”

We are free. The Old Text notes that now the maitresse must spin. It has been more than a month. My clothing hangs loose on me. My husband is a young lover, full of the passion that has grown large as the moon, waxing this whole month. I also have emptied and filled and emptied. Now I am full, full of silk, full of Regina, needing desperately to spin.

I lead him to a grove I have picked out in my mind, long since. I smile, seeing Elisabeth has left a rug and a jug of water there for us.

I run my hands over my husband’s restless flanks under his shirt, step him out of his pants, stroke down from his chest to his belly. He is like a horse, eager to run. A fine sheen of perspiration coats his skin. I put the ringlet on his head, adore him. *We are in no hurry*, I remind him with my hands, though I am pushing him to the ground.

He props himself up on his elbows, watching me undress, which I do, so slowly, swaying, beginning to dance, for myself, for the moon, for the night as much as for him. *For Regina.* The evening air caresses my body like a velvet tongue.

Come Regina, oh Queen, I invite you. Come into my body, enjoy one last night of ecstasy while your soul lingers, absorbing what your new estate brings. You have passed

into the mystery of that final chrysalis. I feel your essence like a veil of milk left on glass.

Look out this night through my eyes. I share myself with you, generous soul. Possess me, Regina, as you once did on our mossy bed.

I am already moving in ecstasy, speaking aloud/speaking in Dialog. *All at once, all one piece.* I pinch my nipples, first one and then the other so that they contract and sharpen. *Mulberries*, she named them.

Philip has risen, moving around me like a hunter circling a wild horse he will tame, seeking to know, never threatening, spinning a presence around and around, knickering and moaning softly, establishing the connection between the three of us which thickens like a fragrant custard.

My hands move down my belly, worshipping Regina in me. My legs move to the pulse in my body. Slowly I turn, my knees loose. I reach down through the thicket of my pubis to the electricity, brush it alive. *I am Regina, Catherine, Regina Catherine.* I brush the velvety lips of my purse with my fingertips. They open, releasing our juices, ripe peach.

Philip is behind us. He nibbles our ear, knickers again, touches our nipples gently, knowing he will shock us into numbness with a rough touch, though we feel his great need for us pressing into our buttocks. He steps backward to probe the deep dimple in our buttocks. Reaches his hand into my dark space between our legs, the door to our cave. Where the goat stands tied, he reaches in from behind.

Ah! We contract, once, violently.

He nips our neck with his lips and the edge of his teeth while his fingers flex just at the edge, ruffling our lips, teasing our clitoris with the back of his hand, as if ignoring it, as if overlooking it, as if discounting it. As if flicking it with silken floss. We arch as a full

electrical bolt explodes through our body, straighten then with an insistent pulse like a drum. Taller, stronger. *Fuck us!* our eyes tell him, as we circle him like a wrestler looking for a hold. If he is not a bit afraid, he should be: we may devour him.

He steps forward, pulls our nipples as if he owns them, that maddening dispassion, brazenly looking right down our eyes, while he flicks.

He sees us both.

Watch our fire, I warn him.

He laughs aloud, puts his finger in his mouth and sucks hard, coating it.

We moan. My legs want to collapse, but *No! No!* Regina begs. *Not yet.*

He runs a slow slick finger over our lips, parting them, spreading the juice like nectar. Our legs like columns, flex like an annealed blade, our hips circle circle following the sun and wind, dancing to the drum of our pulse.

Flick! Flick! His finger searches us, a probing butterfly's tongue. *He has become Regina. She makes love to us.* I can't bear it. I fall to my knees. My stomach convulses.

He feels the contraction around his finger which has probed deeper, now that we are spread before him on my knees. He bends us over, behind us, and taking his horn in hand, so much like the Madonna's crescent moon, he inserts it in us where his finger has been, just past the tip while we pulse and pulse on him.

Time stops. *We could stay here forever,* one of us says to the other. Imago and La Phalene, locked to each other for all of one night, hardly moving. The head of his horn grows huge in us, like all those unholy objects I shoved into myself in the filateur when the Moth possessed me. We want to push. *No pant, darling. Pant.* My mouth is open like a dog's regulating heat.

He withdraws. He stands over us, considering us, building our heat. He is the One who Watches. All this time, observing, growing into knowledge. He waits, studying my readiness, my heat, my contractions.

He steps forward, puts the end of his horn into our panting mouth, leaving it there until it swells into something marine and ruffled, then removes it, palming it.

Regina moves our finger in and out like an egg. She finds another place that opens and inserts our finger. In and out. “Unh!”

He kneels beside us, moves his finger in and out, rubbing our nub, our seed, our word, our lentil, smooth as shell.

“Unh!” We grunt like a sow in labor. Our contractions under his finger yawn into a great need.

He teases us again.

A waver gathers that will engulf us all. I am frightened.

I am with you, she says, You cannot get lost.

I want to know, I say. Am I spinner or thread? I am hanging, at the edge of a curling wave...

“You say you cannot divert the river from the riverbed. You say that everything is moving, and we are a part of this motion. That the soil is moving. That the water is moving. We say that the earth draws water to her from the clouds. We say that the rainfall parts on each side of the mountain, like the parting of our hair, and that the shape of the mountain tells where the water has passed. We say this water washed the soil from the

hillsides, that the rivers carry sediment, that... ”

Give it, Regina begs me. Give it, Catherine.

“Give it!” he whispers urgently. “Give!”

We kneel upright, arm clasped tight around chest, brushing breast hard. Our buttocks tighten. A wave gathers. *Let it go.*

He draws his fingertip slowly upward across the electricity in the thicket of our pubis. I am unfolding inside out, my insides drawn out of me, gutted.

Regina. A great emptiness fills us, grips and releases us, then breaks over me, drowning me.

I wake to the stars and his hand on my belly. He begins stoking the fire again. He knows where to find the silk in my body. It is everywhere. I am the silk. He milks me and milks me. By dawn, I am mindless, shameless. Mad. Divinely sane.

Did she leave? I whisper.

She is gone, he says. And then he cries in my arms. Our truth has been acted out in this circle under the stars. There is nothing left to be said that he doesn't already know.

“I loved her too,” he says and we sleep, stuck together with tears, jizm, truth, and the fine fecund sweat of love and loss.

He pulls my clothing on me, and laughing at my languor, bundles me onto the back of our white mare. He leaps up behind me and takes me away to lay in a remote swim hole all day, near the pavilion, where I recollect my mind, my self. Come to my senses.

My work is done. I do not need to decide whether to burn the cocoons or stifle the worms and save the cocoons. Somewhere it has already been decided. Elizabeth will divine

it, her job. Nothing can harm me. I live in the will of the Madonna.

I resolve myself to speak to Philip so that he cannot say he didn't know. "If we must burn the silk," I say, "there will be no returning from that act."

"We will still live," he says.

My protector.

"And if there is a hearing..." I begin.

"They may not let you continue as maitresse."

I choke around his words as if they jabbed me in the solar plexus. *He knows. He has always known what the stakes were.*

"Then, Catherine," he says gently, "you may have to find out who you really are."

Much later, with the horse shambling toward its stall in the barn, and the colors of the sun bled dry in the sky, the pain in my heart has eased enough for me to speak.

"What shall we call the child of the silk," I ask, my eye on the evening star blazing above the horizon. It is one of those months when the new moon seems to suspend Venus from a spider web off its bottom horn.

"We shall call her Regina," he offers, reins slack, as if it were already known between us.

"Regina." I murmur into his back. "Yes. Queen of the May."