

Conversation Pieces
Volume 4

Counting on Wildflowers

An Entanglement
by
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To Amy Stout, the instigator
&
To Mario, for countless reasons

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Rose Red & Snow White

Skin as white as Virgin Snow,
Ice crystals grown from dust motes,
Specks of Earth thrown skyward:
Snow White

Lips as red as pricked blood, first blood,
Unfolding like the Virgin Rose,
Whole in and of herself:
Rose Red

Colors of the Goddess,
Clues this tale is more than it seems.
Aren't they all?

When Le Bête knocks on their door
Mid-winter, matted ice and snow giving him
A Rasti look, the twin goddesses invite
The Wild in,
Serve him tea and comb his fur.
No sign of gold at first blush.

Then what? Did they watch Jack Frost
Breathe on their windows and listen to
Ice crack into wintry art?
Their version of cable.
Today, would they gulp beer, eat chips,

And watch television, the three of them?
Would Le Bête complain about the
Commercialization of all things sacred
As he clutched the remote?
“Let’s live off the grid,” he’d murmur
While Snow White and Rose Red painted
Their fingernails black as pitch and their lips
Red as a whore’s candied tongue.

Goth or barlot?

Or, perhaps before the Bear enters their domain,
The sisters are hippie-girls, wandering, modern-like,
Looking for some *thing*. Hitching rides.
Living off the land. Eating huckleberries plucked
From their core, the juice staining their lips and teeth
Deep purple. Watching the bloody salmon leap,
They wonder why their mouths water, wonder
What it is they have lost.

Why does it ache so much?

So when a man in gold knocks on their door
Mid-winter, they pull him inside, shining him on.
Until they spot the fur beneath the gold.

Le Bête!

They speak in tongues as they
Rip the clothes from him.

He is only a symbol, after all.

The sisters bury their faces in his fur.
When they look down at their own bodies,
They see they have grown Grizzly claws.
They laugh and embrace each other.

The man, speechless, tries to piece his
Gold suit back together. Alone
In the empty cottage, he closes the door.
Outside, the night is wild with beasts.



Breathing in the Vapors

Today I walked out of our small-town public library in the Columbia River Gorge into sunshine muted by the old oak and several rhododendron bushes in full bloom. Rhododendrons grow all around the library building, and the oak spreads its branches up and over the roof. As my eyes adjusted to the outdoor light, I saw a young girl sitting—nearly hidden—on the ground next to the oak, beneath the cool shade of a white-flowered rhododendron bush. Her hair was short and blond. I smiled. She returned my smile, slightly, her eyes all laughter, trying to maintain her camouflage pose. She was a flower fairy, I was certain.

I kept walking toward home. Rhodies bloomed everywhere. Red. White. Orange. Peach. I remembered the first time I heard the word rhododendron. I was about sixteen, reading *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. She began the book with “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again,” then described the tangled mess Nature had made of the estate. “The rhododendrons stood fifty feet high, twisted and entwined with bracken, and they had entered into alien marriage with a host of nameless shrubs—poor, bastard things that clung about their roots as though conscious of their spurious origin.”

I looked up the word rhododendron then and discovered it was a flowering evergreen shrub. In 1973 when I was eighteen, I traveled to England with my

friend Gail and went to Par, a small coastal village in Cornwall where Daphne du Maurier lived. Rhododendrons decorated every yard—huge evergreen bushes shaking in the ocean breezes. I wanted to breathe the same air Daphne du Maurier breathed—hoping I could become a great writer, too. After breakfast Mrs. S., our host at the bed and breakfast where we were staying, took us to the butcher shop and told the butcher's wife we had come all the way from America to see Daphne du Maurier. The butcher's wife offered to call Mrs. Browning (Daphne du Maurier's married name) and ask if we could come for a visit.

“She's leaving at 11:00,” the woman told us after she hung up the phone. “If you get to Kilmarth (her house) before, she'll meet with you. If not, Esther will show you around.”

Gail and I walked up the long sunken road toward Kilmarth. Every time a truck went by, we had to flatten ourselves against the sides of the road. We tried to hurry up the hill, but just as we got to the drive, a red car drove past us. I knew I had missed my opportunity to meet the famous author.

Esther, the housekeeper, came out of the house as soon as we arrived. She asked us inside and showed us around the huge old gray manor, which had been the gate house of the original estate. I was trembling, I was so excited.

After we looked around the house, Esther took us outside, through an empty garage, and down into a finished basement with several rooms, one of which had a desk inside with paperback copies of Daphne du Maurier's books spread out on the top of it. It may

or may not have been where she wrote. It smelled like my grandmother's root cellar. I breathed in the aroma deeply.

A few days later Gail and I returned to Kilmarth to have Daphne du Maurier sign some books. This time the writer herself came out to greet us. She was in her mid-sixties, dressed in a gold tunic with a gold belt and beige-colored slacks. She seemed powerful, yet almost shy. I was so happy I could barely talk. I can't remember a single word we spoke to one another.

After my visit, Daphne du Maurier and I wrote to each other for a while. Then I read *Rule Britannia*. I wrote and told her I didn't believe Americans would really take over England, which was the premise of the book. Naturally, she never wrote back. And I lost her letters. My only excuse was that I was eighteen years old and I misplaced them. Just as I had misplaced my brain when I wrote to criticize her book. Some kind of knee-jerk nationalism had kicked in.

No longer.

I saw my first rhododendron in England that summer of 1973. Now I live in the Pacific Northwest, and they grow everywhere, in the wild and in practically every yard. To try and get to the essence of the rhododendron flowers, I take close-up photographs of them. I love their spots curving down to their center like a mottled path to the truth. I love the sensual curl of the petals. A member of the dogbane family, they are quite poisonous. Some scholars believe the Pythian priestesses at Delphi in Greece chewed on this great laurel before going into their oracular trances. I don't eat the rhododendron, but I get close enough to breathe in her

vapors, to have her imprinted on my being, or mine on hers. Is the truth now swirling around somewhere in my brain?

The white rhododendron the young flower fairy sat beneath today was not wild in the true sense of the word: someone had planted it years ago. I had photographed its petals before; they looked like the sugary white folds in a wedding cake—only less static, more flowing, like a wedding gown. What was the flower fairy learning, sitting beneath the ancient oak and magical rhodie? I hoped she was getting a sense of her true powerful self.

When I was a teenager, I loved Daphne du Maurier's books even though I felt vaguely uncomfortable after reading each one. In *Rebecca*, the young narrator is never named—except as Mrs. de Winter. Her husband is a cold unhappy man old enough to be her father. She is shy, quiet, with few opinions and little to say, nothing like Rebecca, the previous Mrs. de Winter who was beautiful, opinionated, and apparently selfish and unfaithful. She was also dead, killed by her husband, it turns out, when he learns she is pregnant with another man's child. He gets away with the murder. Rebecca wasn't actually pregnant but dying and had goaded Maxim de Winter into executing her so she wouldn't have to suffer a long painful illness. (In other words, she was asking for it.) Mrs. Danvers, Rebecca's loyal housekeeper, burns down Manderley, and the narrator is finally free from the ghost of Rebecca. Unfortunately, she's still married to Mr. de Winter.

I never liked Maxim de Winter. I didn't understand the narrator's attraction to him. (Just as I never

understood Jane Eyre's attraction to Mr. Rochester.) Nevertheless, I rooted for the mousy unnamed woman—even though I was nothing like her and thought ol' Becca sounded like much more fun.

When I first read *Rebecca*, I did not question Mr. de Winter's right to kill Rebecca and get away with it. I had swallowed whole the notion that women were possessions of the patriarchy; if they broke certain rules they paid with their lives. I swallowed it because I knew it was true. I saw it on the news nearly every night when I was growing up in a small town an hour from Detroit, Michigan. Men killed women. Sometimes they did it in broad daylight. Sometimes at night. Always they had a reason. She shouldn't have said this or that, done this or that, worn this or that, been in this or that place. In other words, she was asking for it.

In 1974, less than a year after I met Daphne du Maurier, my boyfriend-of-the-moment and I became homeless. We went to live with his uncle for a while. With the help of family and a new girlfriend, the uncle was raising three children on his own—while waiting to stand trial for the murder of his wife. My boyfriend-of-the-moment assured me the uncle hadn't done it. He seemed like a nice man—at first—in a creepy kind of way. At least I thought so until I went into his bathroom. He had a three foot high stack of pornographic magazines next to the toilet (where any of his three children could look through them). I picked one up, opened it, and was horrified to my core. They contained close-up photographs of parts of women, mostly their genitalia. These were not sensual photographs of women's sacredness. The photographer

had not gotten close to the women in an effort to learn the essence of their truth. The pictures were butchered pieces of women, the borders of the photos as coarse and sharp as if they had been cut by a meat cleaver.

I was certain the uncle had killed his wife. And I was sure he had a reason—just as Maxim de Winter had a “reason” for killing Rebecca.

What lives Rebecca and the second Mrs. de Winter had, shackled to that cold fish Maxim de Winter. Rebecca was killed; the second Mrs. de Winter had no identity, but she survived physically, at least. *Rebecca* was published in 1938. Had du Maurier seen those two choices as the only ones women of her time had?

In *My Cousin Rachel*, du Maurier again kills off the title character—although the narrator (and killer by omission) isn’t certain he did the right thing. In *The King’s General*, du Maurier cripples her main character in a horrific accident.

Was she making a comment on the powerlessness of women in male-dominated societies?

Did she enjoy fictionally killing or crippling uppity women?

Or neither of the above?

In Barbara Ehrenreich’s article “A Mystery of Misogyny” she writes that politicians are asking the wrong questions about the Taliban and other Muslim extremists. It shouldn’t be “why do they hate Americans?” but “why do they hate women?” That’s a question that should be directed to most of the societies on this planet. Why is there such a pervasive hatred of women?

Not long ago I watched on television as the police talked about a young murdered woman found in

a Washington, D.C., park. The woman was famous, so her murder was considered newsworthy. A few months earlier, the Seattle area police arrested a man whom they believed had murdered at least fifty women. Most of the women were prostitutes (therefore they were “asking for it”), so their deaths did not become headline news until the man had killed dozens of them. Soon after the Seattle arrest, British Columbia police announced they believed they had discovered what had happened to fifty women who had been missing from their area beginning in the mid-1980s when they found identification for two of the women on a pig farm. Despite pleas from friends and family, the police had done little over the previous twenty years to find these women and had dismissed the idea that a serial killer was on the loose. (The police conceded they should have done a better job as they dug up what they believed was the dumping ground for the murdered women.)

Officials always shake their heads, seemingly perplexed over these kinds of murders, and call the men monsters. They aren’t monsters, they are human beings expressing the (mostly) unspoken dictum of society: men kill women.

In *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier showed us two ways to live under the pater, the male-dominated society. Sometimes when I am in yet another battle with government officials (and others) over environmental and political issues, I feel too visible—as if someone is lining me up in his sights. I am an uppity woman, like Rebecca—only I don’t relish her end. Sometimes an almost overwhelming urge to withdraw comes over me. It feels safer to be quiet, to not stir the pot. To

just disappear. But I don't want to be Mrs. de Winter II either. After all, she was complicit in Rebecca's murder—she stayed with her husband even after she found out the truth; she even reassured him he had had no other choice.

The Delphic Oracle—the rhododendron-sniffing Dragon Priestess of the Earth—was “the highest religious authority in the world” for over 2,000 years according to Norma Long Goodrich in her book *Priestess*. Long before Delphi became Apollo's temple and Pythia “his” oracle, Delphi had been an autonomous religious temple and place of learning. Delphi was, to the people of that time, the center—the navel—of the world. The Pythia priestess went underground to make her predictions. Perhaps, as Goodrich suggests, Pythia did not go underground to inhale bay laurel vapors (or rhododendron vapors) but to breathe in Mother Earth and become the literal Oracle of the Earth.

While breathing the vapors of the Earth, the Delphi Oracle heard: *Know thyself*.

Emperor Justinian closed the oracle and her schools in 529 A.D. Some historians and scholars believe that was the end of any kind of women's power. Others believe that finality came much later, during the Inquisition when tens of thousands of women were accused of being witches, then were tortured, often raped, and murdered.

What does one do with this kind of information, this knowledge? Deny it? Say no, it's not really like that? Become Rebecca and get killed? At least she went down fighting. Become the second Mrs. de Winter, a ghost of a woman, tied to her father/husband, an af-

ter-the-fact accomplice in Rebecca's murder because of her silence?

In *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier did not show us any other ways for women to be in this world: it was either mouthy and dead or silent and living dead. Sometimes I imagine rewriting *Rebecca*. The narrator, who now has a name something like Ursula, discovers the first Mrs. de Winter in the attic, imprisoned by her husband who claims she's crazy. (Yes, shades of *Jane Eyre*.) Ursula rescues Rebecca, who isn't crazy at all, just full of her Self. They send Maxim off someplace where he can get his mind right, so to speak. Then they turn Manderley into an ecological center where they successfully help the land become wild again. Women from all over the world make pilgrimages to The Wilds, where they learn to know themselves and their environment. Later, men come to The Wilds to learn from the women.

Breathing in the vapors of the Earth (or the rhododendrons), listening to the Earth, the Delphic Oracle heard: *Know thyself*. And that is exactly what my Ursula and Rebecca would learn to do: know their wild Selves and their world.

As I walked home today, I thought of the young girl sitting in the dirt communing with the old oak and rhododendrons at the library, a smile on her lips, laughter in her eyes, her head cocked slightly as she listened and breathed.

I hoped she would always be full of her Wild Self, breathing in the Vapors.