

HOW I WROTE *THE DOOMED BRIDEGROOM*

When I handed in a second draft of *Bloodlines: a Journey into Eastern Europe* to my then-agent, she threw a bunch of it out. "This doesn't belong here," she declared, definitively. "It belongs to another book." I was taken aback, because in writing *Bloodlines* I had finally given myself permission to break loose from the boogie woogie New Journalism of my previous work into what would soon enough be called Creative Nonfiction; and I believed that the rejected text belonged very much to that genre. (As critic Smaro Kamboureli was to characterize it so neatly when it was published, "*Bloodlines* lacks a thesis that has to be proven true.") And indeed it does: memoiristic, autobiographical, lyrical, and formally experimental.

But too much so, apparently. For all the "creativity" of *Bloodlines* - I had been very much inspired by that magician of creative documentary, Eduardo Galeano - what the agent had recognized in my out-of-place text was writing that pushed even that envelope. And so was born *The Doomed Bridegroom*, a book for which I had always dreamed the title but hadn't imagined how I would write.

The book was composed in fits and starts. In 1980, stung by the hostile, even vituperative, rejection of my second book, *Long Way From Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (pure New Journalism), I slunk off to Greece for a couple of winters and there assigned myself the task of learning to write nonfiction in a new way (for me). It was form, not function, of the genre that I was struggling with: irreversibly and urgently committed to the world's realities as the source of my content, I was nevertheless impatient to find an expressiveness beyond reportage in which to convey them. So, for the first time as a nonfiction writer, I gave myself permission to use my own subjectivity, my own memory bank, my own life experience, forcibly expressed by "I" and "me." For the first time I was prepared, with some trepidation, to use myself as a subject.

I had brought with me to Greece a bundle of letters from an old lover, some photographs and parts of a journal, and got to work. The result (first version) was published, thrillingly, in a short-lived literary journal co-edited by Robert Kroetsch, but I kept on working on it and it appears as the first story, "Mississippi Dreaming," in the collection I pretentiously called "auto-fictions" (I have no idea what that means), in other words, *The Doomed Bridegroom*. The story is the rather unadorned memoir of my first love affair, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Alberta, with a draft dodger from Jewish, working-class New York, who was incomparably more politically radical, more beautiful and sexually confident than the young men of my acquaintance. Women swarmed around him. *He chose me.*

He was, in fact, the first doomed bridegroom, as I could see much later, looking back on the string of short-lived but intense affairs of the heart or imagination that I had lived through, always with men of the Left, never "Anglo," and either dissident writers or political prisoners so passionately attached to their cause that they were doomed always to be beyond the reach of marriage, at least to me. But for a few exalted hours at least, we lay panting in an embrace of excited camaraderie.

It could also be argued that, because all of my relationships, real and imagined, as lover, girlfriend, comrade, mistress, come to an end because I never have the role of wife, this is actually the story of the *Doomed Bride*.

The Doomed Bridegroom collects these love stories, written under different circumstances and for various reasons. At the Maclean-Hunter Literary Journalism program in Banff under the direction of Alberto Manguel, I worked on a final draft of “Inside the Copper Mountain,” my account of an obsessive relationship with a man I never met, who was in fact dead in the Gulag before I knew his story, the martyred Ukrainian poet, Vasyl Stus. “The Collaborators,” the second story I wrote, began tentatively as a radio dialogue – and remnants of that dialogue are still there – but opened up to be a pitiless expose of a collaboration between me and the Greek man I took to be a revolutionary Communist. Once I had accepted my agent’s dictum that these stories and others like them belonged to a book of their own, I wrote three more: a savaging of Ukrainian and Mennonite erotic history using the Canadian poet Patrick Friesen and the Ukrainian anarchist Makhno as my foils; a cool-headed narrative of a thwarted love affair with a putative Polish dissident; and, by way of denouement, a brief and bittersweet anecdote of a few days spent in shattered Belgrade on the arm of a young poet.

Lynn Crosbie, that enfant terrible of Canadian letters, wrote the book’s only blurb: “Myrna Kostash writes like a Bohemian Tosca – *The Doomed Bridegroom* is a lyrical, lovesick, and compelling antidote to the commonplace memoir.” What had I done? The publisher (NeWest Press) subtitled it A Memoir, just to help booksellers know where to place it. But it’s not a memoir – I certainly had no intention of writing one – and I was relieved that Lynn Crosbie didn’t think so either. (Who wouldn’t rather be in an opera?)

But what was it? Alberto Manguel, reviewing it for the *Globe and Mail* generously lauded its “immense originality” and declared that its “extraordinary melding of politics and sex in various international venues creates what is in effect a new genre” that he called the erotic-political memoir. I’m not going to argue with him but the fact is that I never wrote like that again.

Certainly, before, and after, *The Doomed Bridegroom* I had written passionately about politics, political ideas, politicians and activists, very much from my own point of view with a great big fat attitude, but only that in *Bridegroom* have I written of the erotic swoon at the core of my political arousal. Here I am, for instance, imagining a Czech dissident as a lover saturated by the history of social violence in his homeland: “Take me in cornfields, limbs flailing near the dead, take me in cobblestoned squares near the funeral pyres...” Or, in a lovesick fantasy of myself as a Ukrainian servant girl to my lover’s Polish landlord (actually, the Polish Communist apparatchik) as she is doing the laundry (!): “Soon she will...sniff the man smell of him as he approaches her, feel his heft as he positions himself behind her, his groin pressed against the bunched-up cloth of her skirts over her hips...” Or, one of my favourite pieces of my own writing, this image of the poet Vasyl Stus in his prime, before the Gulag: “I imagine the clenched musculature of his buttocks, the long shaft of his thighs, the dark, soft curl of his sex laid against his belly. He is lying on the grass. His bony fingers hold a plum, its blue skin split open, the flesh’s golden liquor smearing his thumb...”

In spite of its unprecedented intimacy, I had insisted this wasn't a memoir, because I was trying to do so much more. For me the point of the exercise was to find a way to write an erotic history embedded in the politics, historical memories and specific circumstances of the lovers. The lust for a *particular* lover arises from the *general* context of his and my life and times, and so they play themselves out contrapuntally, the one feeding the other and back again. To be sure, to establish the context, I did a prodigious amount of reading, as well as note-taking when I travelled around eastern Europe, as any nonfiction writer would. But to narrate the lust inspired by the context, well, that called for all kinds of literary stratagems: nonlinear structures, shifting narrative voices, imagined scenarios, probable biographies, mock interviews, italicized interventions, superimposed reminiscences, montages, quotes and citations, and intertitles – in short, creative nonfiction in which at times I came perilously close to fiction. It was exhilarating work but I knew that I had exhausted the possibilities of the genre, at least for me. And so I have since written much more conventionally, in the mode of *literary* rather than *creative* nonfiction.

Epilogue:

Since its publication in 1998, *The Doomed Bridegroom* has been translated into Serbian - I have connections :) – and inspired quite a bit of scholarly assessment, a new experience for me. And so I have learned that I “open textual space” and negotiate “multiple subject positions.” That my doomed relationships signify Derridean deferral and absent lovers may represent philosopher Julie Kristeva's notion of “abjection,” not to mention Slavoj Zizek's note about a certain kind of desire that is not just a yearning for the “other” but also a yearning “to be desired by that ‘other’.” Cool. But my next big literary project took me into another kind of relationship completely – with a saint of the Byzantine Church who, as far as I could establish, never existed. The Church's fantasies had got there ahead of me.

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