

# On the Moors of Omaha

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I stepped outside and shut the door behind me, and the moors swept me into their updraft.

*Space opens before her, resolute and uncontested under the sky The wind slaps at her cheeks, whips the long cape against her legs All around the grasses bend and recover with the gusts*

Just across Western Avenue at 60th Street, the neighborhood made a quick transition from small ranch-style houses on small lots to larger ranch-style houses boasting lawns more spacious than garages and shaded by large trees.

*If she were to turn around now, the ramshackle old house would look minuscule She will not turn At last she is alone with the land and sky Without slowing her pace, she heads up the nearest hill It is not the summit she craves, though, it's this movement of attaining it She is cold, out of breath, but she is not tired Instead, she finds the harassment of the wind, the demand of the slope exhilarating The moors join forces with her body and push her to keep going, for the more energy she puts into matching nature's rhythm, the more she forgets the restlessness burning in her heart*

There were several options for turning right off 60th Street, and all of them led through Dundee, the stately neighborhood where the houses were brick with two or even three stories, big lawns, gardens, walls that made you wish to peek behind them, and windows into rooms where, now and then, you could gauge a personality from a glimpse of chair, a vase, a toy.

*No matter how far she walks or how many summits she crests, the moors beckon her, even as they back away She knows the land is teasing her, knows that it wants her just as much as she wants it. It wants to be chased, and she's more than willing to give it that She strides toward the peak of the next hill*

That was me at fifteen, walking the flat, tree-lined sidewalks of Omaha on my way to school. Since we had moved two years earlier to the duplex, where I lived with my mother, my grandparents, and my younger brother, I had loved my walk to and from school, for it offered a cradle of time and space where I could be alone without being an outcast and where I could indulge in imagining myself as someone other than who I was. I had several favorite houses on the route to school, and up until September of my sophomore year, I had amused myself by making up stories about the families who lived in them, and pretending that life was mine. But in recent weeks, my mind, if not my feet, had been covering new ground. Now, what I walked was the Yorkshire moors and with them some inkling of transcendence I could scarcely have put into words but was just beginning to glean. By the time I got to my school twenty minutes after leaving home, I was dazed, vague, elsewhere. The locker room, the bustle, the gossip of girls popped the spell. But, once again, I had found something on that walk, and it was all because of *Wuthering Heights*.

We had a new English teacher that year, a young woman named Miss Hansen, Lonnie Hansen. She was in her early twenties, a graduate of the University of Omaha, who returned after spending a year in Europe. On the first day of school, she told us what to expect in her class during the coming year. We would be reading some of the great classics of world literature. Twice a year, we would each be assigned a book on which we would write a term paper. And every week, we would also be required to write an essay — she called it a “theme” — to be turned in on Friday. It felt scary and alluring. I couldn’t wait.

All my life, I had been a reader. My mother used to say that when I was a baby, I would wake up early and start to cry, and she could get a little extra sleep and keep me happy if she just put a few picture books in my crib. She read to me when I was small, and by the time I was in kindergarten, I couldn’t wait to learn how to read myself. The pace of the lessons in first grade frustrated me. On the first day of second grade, I had read the entire volume of our new Dick-Jane-and-Sally book by the time the bell rang.

It wasn't long before I realized that stories did not exist independently; they had makers: Laura Ingalls Wilder, C.S. Lewis, Rumer Godden, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Beverly Cleary, Noel Streatfield, Elizabeth Headley, Rosamund du Jardin, and Janet Lambert. The presence of the author accompanied me throughout the reading of every book I checked out of the library. Just as the scenes of a book materialized in my imagination, sketchily detailed in the center, fuzzy at the edges, so an even fuzzier, but larger image of the author hovered over all the pages, looking critically down at them as if, even now, she were conjuring them, sentence by paragraph, into being. I began writing myself when I was about eight. Using the Aetna Insurance note pads my father brought home from the office, I wrote and illustrated little books about happy families and the things they did to move closer to some culminating happy event like Christmas day or a summer vacation in Sweden or Death Valley, places I studied wistfully in *The World Book Encyclopedia* and fantasized fleeing to, far from Omaha. Now that I was in high school, I often pretended, while doing my homework, that I was an adult living in New York and working on a feature story for *Newsweek*.

The first novel Miss Hansen assigned was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, published in 1847 when its author was twenty-nine. I still have that Airmont Books paperback. In the middle of an ochre-colored border an oval contains what is meant to be a portrait of Cathy and Heathcliff. Behind Heathcliff, the sky is dark and stormy, while the backdrop for Cathy, who sits demurely at his feet with her legs tucked under her, is a wash of greens and yellows, a summery lawn, flat as Omaha, leading up to a large gray house. Both the man and the woman gaze off to their right, as if watching something that he is more engrossed in than she. His expression could be described as "brooding"; hers is merely pleasant, as if she knew her portrait was being painted and wished to look pretty for it. The more I looked at that illustration,

the more convinced I became that the artist had no idea what the book was about. Catherine Earnshaw would never sit at anyone's feet. Neither of them would treat the land that held them as a mere backdrop or a view to gaze at. The landscape of Cathy and Heathcliff was no nice lawn; it was the moors, and the humans were incarnate with wild, unimpeded, gale-force winds.

*Wuthering Heights* is the story of a few thornily interconnected people who inflict love and punishment on one another. The cuts begin when a dour householder brings into his home an orphaned boy named Heathcliff. Catherine, the man's daughter, and Heathcliff form a close bond, while the son, Hindley, resents the interloper. Growing up, Cathy and Heathcliff are rude, daring, careless, and critical of others, but when, as adolescents, they peek into the windows of the upper class manse of Thrushcross Grange, everything changes. Cathy eventually marries the heir, Edgar Linton, and Heathcliff, choked by grief and rage, flees, only to return three years later, with money and determination to wreak revenge. Cathy dies giving birth to a daughter named after her, Heathcliff marries Edgar's sister Isabelle, who bears a child called Linton, and then Heathcliff plots to force the second generation Cathy into a marriage with Hindley's child, Hareton. It all takes place on the Yorkshire moors, whose wind, briars, crags, and desolate expanses chart the fate of the characters and twist their yearnings.

The moors pervade Emily Brontë's one novel. The author does not describe her landscape all at once, as if to position it in the background before concentrating on what another author might consider the more important actions of the characters; she makes the moors a character, too. Rather than writing detailed passages of that land, moreover, she injects frequent, brief encounters between it and the people who abide with it: a lapwing "wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor," "the wind sounding in the firs," "hazels and stunted oaks." *Wuthering Heights*, the Earnshaw house, is exposed to the weathers, and "one may guess the power of

the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few, stunted firs... and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun." "There was no moon, and everything beneath lay in misty darkness." The crags were "bare masses of stone with hardly enough earth in their clefts to nourish a stunted tree." It's as if Brontë was so attuned to this land that she took its presence for granted, even as she marked its temperamental shifts.

In the introduction to the novel Emily's sister Charlotte compared the author herself to a sculptor who, finding "a granite block on a solitary moor," worked it into the shape of a human head. "With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock: in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its colouring is of mellow grey, and the moorland moss clothes it." Charlotte, whose own novel, *Jane Eyre*, had been published just two months before *Wuthering Heights*, was calling attention to what readers for a hundred and seventy years have perceived in this rugged, rough-edged book: that it is inseparable from its landscape.

Once, in the middle of perhaps my third reading of *Wuthering Heights*, when I was in my forties, I decided to count the number of scenes that actually take place between Catherine and Heathcliff on the moors. I assumed there would be too many to discern, that the peaks and vales, entrances and exits would roll into one another like the hills themselves. But imagination contrives its own plots. Since the story is told from the point of view of the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, those scenes turn out to be few indeed, and the ones we readers are privy to are but reports and gossip: Catherine recalling how she and Heathcliff dared each other as children to stand in the graveyard and call to the ghosts to come up; Joseph, the gnarly servant, tattling that he's seen the pair up in the moors late at night, even as Cathy is courting Edgar Linton; young Heathcliff explaining why, after a walk with Catherine, he has

returned to *Wuthering Heights* alone. That's about it. In the second half of the book, there's more action on the moors, for Nelly accompanies the overly protected second-generation Cathy on many of her ramblings. I preferred the first part, the first Cathy, even though Brontë's style became more sophisticated as she worked her way through her novel. The Cathy-and-Heathcliff half scraped, bit, screamed, and spat; the second half strolled leisurely. How could a dreamy fifteen-year-old girl for whom the yearning to escape and the ache to belong were at constant odds not love a book whose heroine declares, "My love for Heathcliff is like the eternal rocks beneath — a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff." For me, the plot, the characters, the setting, and the author herself crystalized all I secretly wrestled with and could never admit.

There was an image I had of myself at that time. No crag of human shape, I felt like a rag doll whose stuffing was coming out at the seams. I hated being that way and wished I could be unruffled and contained, like the popular girls in my class. I had known most of them since I started attending this small private girls' school in seventh grade, after my parents got divorced, and they seemed to have been born into smoothness. Their hair, parted on the side, swung neatly around their chins as they bent over their books in class. Although we wore school uniforms, they had a dress code of their own, which shifted in subtle ways that they either instigated or began following together with the attentive immediacy of pigeons in flight. One year they wore flats and panty hose. For a while they sported circle pins on their blazers. There was a camel hair coat phase, a pink lipstick phase. There was the phase of White Shoulders cologne. No matter what the accouterments, they had a knack for keeping their skirts neat and their white shirts crisp, so they looked the same at the end of the school day as they had when they arrived in the morning. Nothing unpredictable seemed to issue from them. "Oh, God!" they would sigh as they rolled their eyes at one another when something was beneath their consideration.

Even their alarm was calculated. Whenever a bee flew in the classroom window, they would scream and jump out of their seats.

I, to the contrary, got ruffled. My shirt came untucked, ink from my cartridge pen stained my fingers, and my hair was curly and unmanageable. I couldn't keep up with the fashion trends, not only because my mother's job as a secretary at the University of Omaha didn't pay enough to afford such luxuries, but also because I disdained them as much as I coveted them. I longed to be one of the smooth girls and despised the adherence it demanded to their secret rules. I didn't get invited to parties. Often, when I spoke up, the words burst out of me in a sudden gush of revelation, and when that happened, the other girls sighed or pretended not to hear. Every now and then, I tried to imitate them, as if I could act my way into their world. Once, when a bee flew in the window of the biology classroom on a warm spring day, I, too, shrieked and leaped up from my seat. When we all sat back down after a mild chastising by our teacher, I felt a fool.

Restlessness, fury, and desire burned so hot in me that I felt at times it would erupt like a rash on my skin. My parents' divorce had solved one big problem, but I soon found out that it had created others. For years I'd begged my mother to get a divorce. My father was an alcoholic who, when he drank, discovered all kinds of reasons to resent my mother and beat her up for them, and I was the one who had to pull him off, call the police, and wake up my little brother, so we could flee for the rest of the night to a neighbor's house. After the divorce, I had been excited to move with my grandparents into a new apartment, where there was a swimming pool and built-in air conditioning, even though I would now have to share a bedroom with my mother. Shortly after starting at my new school, however, I began to understand class and wealth and how thoroughly they can exclude, for all my classmates had two parents and lived in big homes. Two years after we moved into the apartment, my mother could no longer afford the rent, so, when I was fourteen, we moved into a two-bedroom duplex. Now my brother had his room in the basement, and my

mother and I crammed into an even smaller bedroom. She was under the impression that we were both happy with this arrangement. She liked to think of us as best friends, and she often told me that she knew me better than I knew myself. Because she had suffered a lot and was vulnerable, I didn't correct her.

What I was quite sure she had no inkling of were the florid contents of the inner life I was actively conjuring. In the afternoons after school, before my mother got home from work, I would crouch on my bed and peek between the curtains at Johnny Miloni, the handsome law student who lived with his mother in the front part of the duplex, as he shot baskets in the driveway. Johnny was tall and lanky, with black curly hair, and he wore shorts and t-shirts that pulled, when he dribbled and jumped, to reveal olive-colored skin above his shorts. The muscles on his arms rippled when he moved and his skin glistened with sweat. Sometimes I glimpsed his armpits, furred with dark hair. At night, as my mother slept in the twin bed just inches away, I contrived epic fantasies of being swept up in Johnny's arms as he rescued me from tornadoes and school bullies or navigated us to the safety of a desert island after a storm at sea. What I craved was both privacy and liberation. From the library I checked out books about distant places and made detailed itineraries of imaginary journeys that I unfurled on the walk to and from school. That brick house with the circular driveway curving around a garden, for example, was Piccadilly Circus, which I was just now passing on my way to see my publisher about my new book. The intersection of Western Avenue and 60th Street might one day be the gateway to Temple of the Golden Buddha in Bangkok and another day a lane winding through a fishing village in France. After we started reading *Wuthering Heights*, however, all other lands faded. Now it was the moors I crossed to and from school.

*Wuthering Heights* gave me the inkling that being contained was not so advantageous after all. In fact, studying that book, I encountered not only characters who seemed to have the same kind of unscratchable itch I did, but a new grasp of



how an author could throw herself into things like longing, rage, jealousy, and madness as if into a “range of gaunt thorns” and emerge, yes, of course, stung, but with a tale that she had created in the process. The book itself, not the author and certainly not the characters, became the thing contained. The writing had the power to contain all manner of old rags spilling messily out of seams. Without the mess, in fact, the writing could not exist.

As we read the novel, Miss Hansen taught us about the Brontës — the whole family, not just Emily, since you could not talk about one Brontë without talking about all of them. By the time Emily was seven, her mother and two older sisters had died of tuberculosis. Barely four years separated the remaining four siblings, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne. The family lived in a two-story building of gray brick at the edge of the village of Haworth in southeastern Yorkshire. Right outside their door rushed the moors. The children’s father, Parson Patrick Brontë, was a grim, self-exiled man who preferred to dine alone in his own room. He did have a good library, and he encouraged his children to use it. The young Brontës read eagerly and soon began to create their own imaginary worlds, which they called Angria and Gondol. They wrote the stories of the inhabitants in tiny books they made by cutting pieces of paper into two-inch strips and binding the pages together with thread. Of all the children, tall, thin Emily was the most strong-willed. She refused to attend Sunday school, she was not good at needlework, and she daydreamed. Sometimes she got her way by self-destructive means. At seventeen she enrolled as a pupil at Roe Head School in Mirfield, where Charlotte was working as a teacher, but she was miserable there and, after starving herself for two months, she was sent home. Two years later she herself worked briefly as a teacher in Halifax, eight miles from Haworth, but the work was odious to her, and again she returned to Haworth. As they grew up, the three daughters continued to devote their creative energies to writing, while Branwell became a painter. Emily and Charlotte contrived a plan to start a school of their own and traveled to Brussels to improve their French, but

after nine months, they changed their minds. Again the moors and the parsonage took them back. By then, Branwell was in the throes of alcoholism and drug addiction. Charlotte, Emily, and Anne devoted themselves to writing books and in 1847, calling themselves Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell to disguise the fact that they were women, they sent their three novels to a publisher, who accepted all of them. Emily died a year later, at the age of thirty, of tuberculosis. "We are quite confident that the writer of *Wuthering Heights* wants but the practiced skill to make a great artist," read a review of the book found in Emily's desk after she died.

Emily Brontë's novel is rough. Her writing can be excessively passionate. Even at fifteen I could discern that. But compared to *Wuthering Heights*, other books, both of her time and my own, seemed superficial in their depiction of yearning, an ache that the writers I was familiar with tended to portray as a mild hankering for a sweet, but which, as Emily and I recognized, was actually more like a monster with teeth and claws and a thirst for blood. She knew how to reveal, maybe even revel in, not only cruelty's manifestations, but the drive to commit them. Emily Brontë tortures her characters: a bulldog grabs Cathy's ankle and won't let go, Heathcliff hurls a pot of hot applesauce at taunting Edgar, the narrator of the book scrapes Cathy Linton's wrist back and forth against the jagged edge of a broken window, and Hindley hangs a spaniel by a kerchief on a fence. Love and rage get all tangled up together in this book. One is either proof of the other or a pike right through the middle of it. "Well, if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend — if Edgar will be mean and jealous, I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own," vows Cathy. Did expressing all this violence relieve the author, no stranger to her own brand of self-harm, of a drive for more outward forms of savagery?

In my own life, rage and desire were forces that wracked in ways I would never admit. How could I tell anyone that, even after the divorce, I sometimes still wished my father would die? I'd wither up from shame if anyone found out how, when I watched Johnny Miloni play basketball on the driveway, I wished he would jump,

bend, or twist in such a way that I could get a glimpse of the mystery inside his shorts. I knew, too, that I was, to my core, a selfish person. Ever since I was small, my mother had gotten periodic migraines, and when that happened, she had to lie in bed for two or three days with the curtains drawn. In the afternoon, when I got home from school and went into the darkened bedroom, the room smelled of sweaty, stale sweetness. My mother moaned as she greeted me, which I knew was no greeting at all, but a message of her desperation and a plea, aimed at me, for help. "Could you rub my head?" she'd ask. I could. I did. I sat on the edge of the bed beside her and worked my fingers back and forth in her thin, soft hair. Her neck was moist with perspiration, her skull and the pain inside it resisted my hand. In those moments, the prospects for freedom seemed as unreachable as fresh air, untrodden snow, the dunes of the Sahara Desert, a boyfriend, a room of my own. I never could make my mother's headache go away, and I hated both my own powerlessness and her sickness. I hated her for expecting me to make her better, and more than anything I hated myself for so despising this small thing she wanted. So, I punished myself for my wickedness. With my right hand, I kept rubbing gently, just the right pressure she liked, back and forth, back and forth, while at the same time I pressed my left wrist into my mouth and bit down as hard as I could.

In the end, Emily Brontë brings all her characters, with the exception of Nelly Dean, to ruin. She has them torturing one another's psyches until they either die or just manage to hang on, clinging to what we assume will be a life of misery. Even the names of these characters harass and grab: Cathy Earnshaw Linton, Linton Heathcliff, Heathcliff, Hindley Earnshaw, Edgar Linton, Cathy Linton Heathcliff, Hareton Earnshaw — all that C and L and H and E, like cries from hell. What taught this strange, solitary writer so much about passion, cruelty, and suffering? What did she really yearn for? What was it that so enraged her? Whatever it was that got inside her mind and ate away at it like an earwig, she was not afraid to scratch

so hard that her very soul poured out into her work. To me, at fifteen, it was all immensely startling and satisfying. *Wuthering Heights* hinted that, one of these days, I would be able to shape my own disorderly outrage and wanting into words.

I had gotten a C on our first essay assignment, a description of my summer vacation. Miss Hansen pointed out that I had written two endings for it and ought to pick just one. However, she had also circled a part of the essay that she liked. The next week, I made sure to write one clear and precise ending, and I studied what I had done in that one paragraph, so I could cadge some style from it. I got an A. And in that moment of looking at the paper she'd handed back and seeing that red mark of excellence inked at the top, something opened up. I got a glimpse of a thing I could do, possibly quite well, and the long path — one whole school year — in which to get better and better at it. In the weeks that followed, I wrote about the Brontës, I wrote a memoir from the point of view of a giant in a laundry soap commercial who lives in the washing machine, about the pop-up place on the outskirts of Omaha that opened only in December to sell Christmas trees, about a statue in front of a Chinese restaurant. After the Beatles came to America, and I fell in love with them, I found a way to write about them a few times. Every week I got an A. An A- was a disappointment. Sometimes I got an A+ and once an A++. On one essay Miss Hansen wrote, "You are becoming one of my favorite writers."

In those essays, I never exposed the details of our embarrassing duplex or my mother sleeping naively in the bed beside mine as I conjured epics that always ended with my being swept up into Johnny Miloni's arms. I didn't write about my own experience with the violence of alcoholism or the torque of envy and contempt I nursed for the girls who never got rumped. I knew, however, that one of these days, it would be permissible to do so. Emily Brontë and the weekly essays taught me that, no matter how weird or broken your family, or how wild your own cravings, none of it mattered if you could write. That was the great revelation.

Anything at all could be written, and when it was written — or even before that, even while you were in the act of writing it — you had power over the stuff of your life. It could get you down, but it couldn't conquer you.

"Nelly, I *am* Emily!" I practiced the moves of my own possible self each day, autumn, winter, and spring of that year, on my twenty-minute walk to and from school. What united us — Emily, Cathy, and me — was the moors. I walked the straight, flat sidewalks of Omaha as if I were striding over the moors. To walk on the moors was to move with purpose and without restraint. On the moors you could go in any direction. Sidewalks did not limit you, stop signs did not require you to look left and right, people were absent and so did not judge. On the moors you could run away and run toward at the same time. The moors were waves, they were the stratosphere, they were magnets, and they were the physical manifestation of your own inner drive. They were wild, and they wanted to eke the wildness out of you. The moors wanted you out of breath, drenched with the experience of keeping up with their rhythm. And you were glad to comply, because in that breathless state, you were of their making. You were filled with moor and sky, self and purpose, drive and solitude. As I walked each day down the suburban streets on my way to school, I was out walking my old idea of myself. The girl with the stuffing seeping from her seams was ripping it all clean out.

I finally visited Haworth Parsonage when I was in my mid-thirties, more than twenty years after we read *Wuthering Heights* in Miss Hansen's class. I went there with the man I would be marrying in a few weeks, along with his son, who was spending his junior year abroad at the University of Edinburgh, and his son's new girlfriend. The Brontës' old home is a large house built of gray stone, not high on a hill like *Wuthering Heights*, but standing rather snugly at the edge of the village. It's a museum now, with some rooms devoted to exhibitions of Brontë memorabilia and some staged to make it seem that the family still lives there. On the second floor, in one of the bedrooms, a glass case contains the children's tiny books about Angria

and Gondol, along with maps and floorplans for those imaginary lands. Downstairs in the dining room, you can stare at the long table where the women wrote their books, as you imagine all the brilliant strokes of the pen that fortunate piece of furniture bore. Near the table stands the black horsehair sofa where Emily died. One of her shawls is draped over the arm. The sofa faces the window and the moors on which Emily must have gazed for sustenance in her last days, even as her body weakened. "I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills," the dying Cathy Earnshaw entreats Nelly. "Open the window again wide: fasten it open!" Next door to the house, the old gravestones in the churchyard heave out of the ground, as if the dead themselves cannot bear their confinement.

When we arrived at the Brontë house, it was late in the afternoon, much later than we had intended. We had gotten delayed in London, and the young people had to be back at the university the following day, so we couldn't stay overnight, as I had hoped. We hurried through the museum and then, because I had expressed my wish to walk on the moors, we all set out together. It was not a gratifying experience. My fantasies of attunement with this landscape had never included others and, to make matters worse, it was apparent that the other three were just indulging me, and their hearts were not in this venture. We strolled, we did not stride. The young woman held back, while father and son kept up a running conversation. I experimented with gunning out ahead of them, but that make-believe rendezvous with my fantasy felt awkward and silly, as unconvincing to the moors as to myself. We turned back after half an hour or so and settled down for tea in one of the shops in town that cater to Brontë tourism, and then we got in the car and headed north. I was excessively disappointed. It wasn't until years later that it occurred to me that I had already made that walk on the Yorkshire moors many times and many years before, when I strode over the moors of Omaha, practicing wildness, freedom, and a writer's life.