

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

alan catlin

Bronte's Inferno

"Branwell was drunk. Their father was ill so the girls turned to their writing."

Wildflowers abound among the headstones behind the parsonage Mr. Bronte had a lifetime appointment to. Inscriptions read "For Our Dearly Beloveds", siblings dead at ages three and two. Almost half the children in the parish gone by the age of six, the adults before they reached thirty. A lifetime appointment meant contemplating this through a study window, the backyard a graveyard, sexton working well into the night, stone masons, as well, carving names with a heavy chisel and sledge by the failing light; his wife, his children all lost before he died.

The first child to go was Maria, neglected and abused by boarding house martinets, later immortalized in Jane Eyre, the angelic child too good for this world, the evil ones, typical of what was left behind. Remaining children inventing an elaborate fantasy world, each the other's imaginary friend, scribbled into life in miniature books, plays, novelettes studies for a life to be. The outside world in town a septic mess, raw sewage in the streets, running down cobblestones, fouling the water, putrescent corpses as well. The nearby moors a refuge, those wind blasted plains, those hills, unspoiled, refulgent, free.

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The son would be the next one to die. A victim of his unrealizable, unrealistic dreams; a portrait artist with no subjects, excelling only at the art of self destruction; his one true picture, the last one, of Death leaning over the artist's bed, beckoning him to follow Death home. And he did

Two younger sisters to follow, Emily too weak after Branwell's funeral to ever leave the house again. Refusing to admit she was ill, stubbornly trying to maintain her daily routine of household chores. Death claiming her soon after.

Poor Ann, afflicted, tubercular, the family curse upon her, submitting to all the known cures: the bloodletting and the leeches. Paler and paler, weaker and weaker, without complaint chasing Emily to her grave.

Leaving Charlotte behind to carry on, to marry against her father's express wishes, though her widower would tend him to his end six years later, long after Charlotte had passed on from complications of a late pregnancy, her unexpected happiness largely unfulfilled, her last work incomplete; all those images gone like the first Mrs. Rochester, those tenants of Wildfell Hall.

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“Death is the door to life” in Ivory and Bronze, V&A, London

Her personal angel of death is
a classically proportioned man
whose right wing is protectively
cradling her bare white shoulder,
the left wing poised to encircle
her waist in a silent, sudden,
smothering embrace she senses
the nearness of but is powerless to
resist, is hypnotized by the silence
between the motion of the wings
and her quickening last breaths,
an expression like love on her face,
his, suggests all things could be possible,
even the unthinkable.

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When Women Were Birds

The energy of slaves
on hummingbird wings

too dazzling to see;
a prism of bowed light

on black canvas after
brief Summer rain.

Shallow puddles to bathe in;
the sky drinks itself.