

In the Footsteps of Sylvia Plath

by Karen V. Kukil



Monday, 13 June 2016, Yorkshire

The Hebden Bridge Tourist Office across the street from my bed and breakfast was not open at 9:30, so I was on my own, armed with a few hand drawn maps from my friend and Sylvia Plath scholar Peter Steinberg. As I walked up Bridge Gate, I met a woman walking her dogs. ‘Can you walk up to Heptonstall?’ I asked. ‘Yes, love. You follow the Cobble Hill Path.’



Cobble Hill Path & Methodist Graveyard, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire

My climb up the old pack horse trail through the woods along ancient moss-covered stone walls was steep and humid. I rested in the Methodist graveyard near the headstones of the Townsend family to look out over the village nestled below along the River Calder.

The cobbled Buttress eventually led me to Heptonstall Road, which was narrow without a shoulder. I decided to walk up a private drive to see if there was a path to the top of the moors. A young man and his mother directed me around their back garden into the woods. ‘Just follow the trail to the road higher up.’ Fuchsia foxglove lined the path—a good sign.

At the top of the hill was the Towngate Tearoom. Dripping with sweat, I entered and asked for a cold glass of Harrogate sparkling water. To cool down I sat out front across from the Post Office and drew the street scene. Houses made of gray gritstone and roofed with slate looked rather bleak. A kelly green door

with a black keyhole caught my attention. As if on cue, a calico kitten ran down the stone sidewalk and posed by the door – another sign that made me smile.



View outside the Towngate Tearoom, Heptonstall, Yorkshire

I sat sketching and drinking for some time. A woman stopped and asked if I was an artist. I told her about my mission to see Sylvia Plath's grave and the Beacon. She was intrigued and described her morning walk up to Heptonstall on the public foot path through meadows and beautiful forests. I vowed to go back to Hebden Bridge that way. I was impressed by how elegant this British woman looked after her hike compared to me. My jeans were soaked from wet brush on the trail and I had seeds stuck to the soles of my sneakers. She, by contrast, was wearing short pants that did not show the dew and a green slicker and silk scarf tied casually in a loose knot. She mentioned that her daughter was at Oxford reading Seamus Heaney. Her thesis was on Dante's *Inferno* and its influence on Heaney's poetry. At her daughter's suggestion, this lovely woman visited the Brontë Parsonage on the weekend and was here in Heptonstall to see Sylvia's grave and Ted Hughes country. We parted fast friends.

I used the bathroom before venturing out into town. A 'polite notice' was displayed near the sink warning me to turn off the hot water completely before leaving.

I ventured up the hill past the Post Office and the White Lion pub that served 'lovely meals' from noon until 3 p.m. A sign caught my attention pointing north to Hardcastle Crag. I asked a man weeding his garden how far he thought it was to the Crag. 'About two miles,' he guessed. I walked on a bit to see the landscape. After a clutch of small houses, the path skirted fields of kneeling dairy cows with bright red tags stapled to their ears. Wild heliotrope dotted the path as it opened up to vast moors of seething grasses penned in by networks of black stone walls. Before the scattered showers could snuff out my heat, I turned back to town like Sylvia at the end of her poem 'Hardcastle Crag.' For the first time since I arrived in Yorkshire, I felt like I was walking in the footsteps of Sylvia Plath.



Moors above Hardcastle Crag

On my way back to the crossroads, my mind was racing with snatches of verse to match my pace. I suddenly realized that if you are born in Yorkshire in the midst of this beauty you must on some level become a poet. I tried to understand this world so far from American suburbs and modern conveniences. Here were men's clubs and pubs, laborers and weavers, a hardscrabble life on the edge of cliffs and quarries. All relied on their instincts and their love of the land.



St. Thomas Beckett's Cathedral Ruins & St. Thomas the Apostle Church, Heptonstall, Yorkshire

Back in town by Weavers' Corner, I looked over the ruins of St. Thomas Beckett's Cathedral—a martyr to the cause. The Catholic nave was robbed of its bell once calling the faithful to service. Thirteenth-century architectural features were bolstered with metal poles and an interior crown of nesting pigeons. To my great surprise, 'Sylvia Plath, first wife of Ted Hughes' was mentioned at the end of the National Trust legend describing the ruins and graveyard, not the Shackletons and other great men whose flat headstones paved the path to the entrance of St. Thomas the Apostle Church next door.

As I slowly approached the Gothic Revival Church decorated with gargoyles and locked burgundy doors, I tried to imagine Sylvia's funeral on Monday, 18 February 1963. At first I didn't notice a huge crow

perched above on some broken stone filigree. ‘Beware,’ he seemed to cry. ‘You are not welcome.’ Apparently, the sacred interior lined with stained glass and burning candles belonged solely to the Hughes family.



Path to the Graveyard, Heptonstall

I moved down the path toward the graveyard. It was much closer than I had expected. I could just imagine Ted Hughes with his family and friends carrying Sylvia’s casket to the neighboring field in the snow. Thanks to the British mother I met earlier, I knew Sylvia was nestled near a bush in the front graveyard. Others had told me that the grave was a mess, littered with rocks and plastic pens. How would I react? Would I weep and feel depressed?

As I approached the grave, I was so surprised to see a spray of pink columbine in full bloom filled with bees. Nearby were blue forget-me-nots. There was one plastic pen on the headstone and a few dead red roses, which were no longer needed to mark the life of a poet. The townsfolk and National Trust had decided to honor Sylvia Plath. They could not have made me happier. Plath the poet was now as important to British culture as famous saints and explorers. Even the BBC featured Plath’s grave on their TV series *Happy Valley*, showcasing the inscription on her headstone in the first episode: EVEN AMIDST FIERCE FLAMES THE GOLDEN LOTUS CAN BE PLANTED.



Karen Kukil in the Heptonstall Graveyard

I met two women in the graveyard. They took my picture near Sylvia’s grave and confessed they were more Brontë and Emily Dickinson fans. One of the women, author Tamar Yellin, told me she was a volunteer at the Brontë Parsonage Museum. In a field dominated by men, they were there like me to

honor Sylvia Plath. Resilience was all I could think—women who endure through their writing. And like the village gardener who planted flowers on the grave, we have all played a part in Plath’s resurrection.

I walked back to the Tearoom for a look at the lunch menu. My two new friends, Tamar Yellin and Alison Neal, encouraged me to join them. Over onion quiche, salad, and pots of Darjeeling tea we talked of Lyndall Gordon’s extraordinary biography of the Dickinson family (*Lives Like Loaded Guns*), Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage in the Lake District, Brontë manuscripts, and even the Japanese tourists who get lost on the moors. Now there are signs in Japanese near the Parsonage.

After lunch, I headed up Smithwell Lane to the Beacon. Sheep crowded together near a stone wall under beech trees to keep out of the rain. Their faces were mottled and curious. I photographed them with Stoodley Pike, a peace monument on the distant horizon.



Sheep near the Beacon, former Hughes Family Estate, Heptonstall

Way out in the country, stone houses were built near the road. Concrete slabs arching over a trench for rain wash led up to their front doors. The Beacon was set back from the road with trees and bushes guarding its front door. An attached garage was boarded up and now used as a studio with picture windows overlooking the back meadow. I walked to the access road for Field Farm. Down the lane I was able to get a shot of the Beacon from the back. Flocks of partridge hiding in the grass startled me when I approached, as if guarding the former Hughes family estate. I kept my distance.



Rear View of the Beacon & Bridle Path near Lumb Bank, Heptonstall

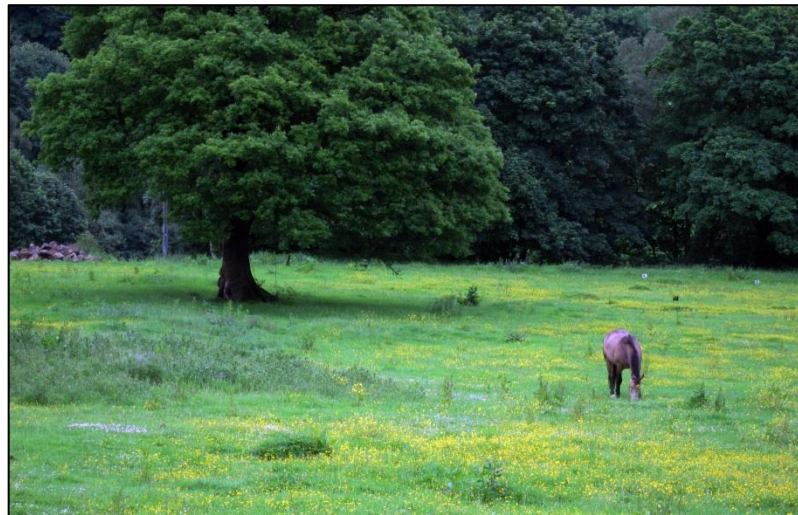
On my way back to town, I noticed a sign for Lumb Bank and knew it had been leased to the Arvon Foundation, where my new friend, Tamar Yellin, studied fiction writing years before. I wanted to get a

better look and walked down the Bridle Path lined, again, with foxglove. I had no plans to visit Lumb Bank itself heavily guarded by a crew of crows, but I was surprised to find a sign for the Calder Valley Public Path. From the Beacon I knew that Sylvia had walked it many times toward Heptonstall. It was wooded and rocky with steep paths. Windy lookouts exhilarated me. Patches of grass off to the side, I suspected, were flattened from resting deer in the night.

I followed the path to Hell Hole Rocks. This was a dangerous place. Off to the right side of the trail was a sheer drop to the quarry below. It was easy to fall into the inferno. Why didn't Sylvia pay more attention to the danger signs in her life, I wondered? Two hikers warned me to stay on the trail. I followed them along the Public Path hugging stone walls and veering to the left into the woods. After walking thirty minutes or so downhill I found myself on the bridleway and knew I had made it back to Hebden Bridge in one piece. The cobbles were slippery, so like an old woman I hung onto the metal rail down the left side of the path. Children scampered up past me undaunted.

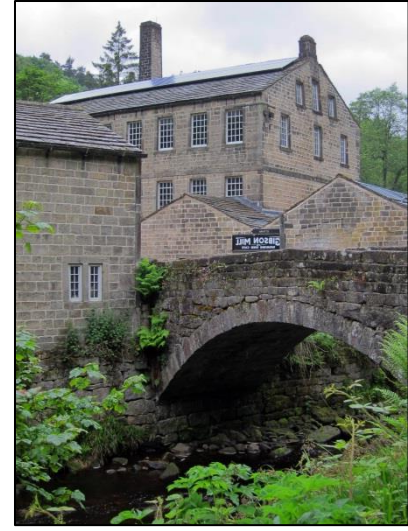
After a refreshing bath at Laurel End House, I skyped my husband without drying my hair. Bo was just waking up to coffee and a scone in Massachusetts. He thought I looked like a drowned duck. Yes, a happy drowned duck, energized from a walk to the summit and back. I spent the evening at the Olive Branch restaurant drinking red wine, listening to soft jazz, and writing about my day playing on the moors with Sylvia Plath's spirit.

Tuesday, 14 June 2016



Horse Farm, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire

On Tuesday, I spent the day in Hebden Bridge exploring Hardcastle Crag, the favorite picnic site of Sylvia's mother-in-law, Edith Hughes. I followed Hebden Water out the back end of town past the Cricket Ground and horse farms through Hebden Wood to New Bridge. The central path on the National Trust estate to Gibson Mill, a former cotton mill, was dotted with huge pine needle nests in the conifers full of hairy wood ants. Fields of bluebells were beginning to fade in a silent valley of leaf-loam. I crossed the river and climbed out of the gorge to spy the wild fluttering moorland above the prehistoric Crag before heading back to the Mill for lunch. Dogs were welcomed into the restaurant with their owners. Muddy footprints did not seem to matter.



Ant Nest & Gibson Mill, Hardcastle Crag

Wednesday, 15 June 2016

The upcoming 26th Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf at Leeds Trinity University was the reason I was in Yorkshire. On Friday afternoon, I planned to speak on ‘Curating Virginia Woolf and Her Associates’ with two other American librarians, Trevor Bond and Isaac Gewirtz. But first, on Wednesday there was a preconference trip to the Brontë Parsonage Museum, organized by Dr Jane de Gay. Like me, Woolf made a pilgrimage to Haworth. Her subsequent essay, ‘Haworth, November, 1904,’ launched her career when it was published in the *Guardian*. Plath visited the Parsonage in 1956. Her hike up to Top Withens inspired poems and an article, ‘A Walk to Withens,’ published in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Plath particularly admired the writing of Emily Brontë, who also died at thirty. As I entered the Parsonage, I noticed the sofa in the crimson dining-room on the left on which Emily Brontë died on 19 December 1848. This horsehair couch was quickly sketched in 1956 by Plath in her blue Challenge Duplicate Book along with Charlotte Brontë’s 1830 manuscript, written in microscopic script. Upstairs in Charlotte’s bedroom, her tiny black satin slippers were on display with her bridal crown of heirloom lace. Emily’s miniscule bedroom over the entrance hall included an interactive art installation by Tamar Stone featuring a small doll bed embroidered with words by the Brontës on satin pillows and coverlets. As I walked past various display cases of family relics, I was particularly impressed by the detailed watercolors of birds and botanical specimens painted 175 years ago by Emily Brontë as she sat on her three-legged stool out on the moors. As visitors exited the museum, there was a moving exhibition of love letters and manuscripts curated by novelist Tracy Chevalier celebrating the bicentenary of Charlotte Brontë’s birth.

After a self-guided tour through the Parsonage, a few of us left by the graveyard gate to hike along the Pennine Way to Top Withens. But first we stopped on the Haworth Moor to see the film set built by the BBC for an upcoming documentary on the Brontës, including a mock nineteenth-century version of the rectory perched on a desolate heath.



BBC Film Set of the Brontë Parsonage, Haworth Moor

I raced on ahead anxious to reach Near and Middle Withens. Dianne Hunter, my English professor from Trinity College who taught a seminal course on Woolf and Plath in 1974, took her time through pastures of yellow-eyed sheep and gorse, absorbing every nuance of the wild landscape. We all met up again at the Brontë Waterfall where I took a photograph of Professor Maria Bent and her husband from Chelyabinsk, Russia. We were Brontë acolytes from all over the world, out of breath, but determined to reach Top Withens through fields of purple thistle at the higher elevation.

The stone house at Top Withens is the site believed to be the inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*, one of Plath's favorite novels. In September 1956, Plath and Hughes hiked there through the trackless South Pennine moors from Heptonstall Slack. The house was still intact, according to Plath's sketch in her notebook, although the ridgepole of the roof was broken. Two sycamores guarded the farm house overlooking the undulating moors in every direction.



Top Withens, Haworth, Yorkshire

Now the structure is a roofless blockhouse with wall tops repointed and re-cemented. As I stood there under the same sycamore that Plath climbed on her visit to Top Withens nearly sixty years ago, ghosts were nowhere to be seen but in my head. Lines from Plath's poem 'Wuthering Heights' came to life. The wind did indeed pour by me 'like destiny bending everything in one direction' and the heather invited me to whiten my 'bones among them.' Cathy haunted Heathcliff after her death in the novel; Sylvia too haunted Ted for the rest of his life after her untimely death in 1963. But as Plath wrote in her travel journal, this 'house of love lasts as long as love in [the] human mind.' Standing there alone on the top of the world, I felt the sky lean on me too, 'the one upright among all horizontals.'



Karen Kukil at Top Withens, Haworth, Yorkshire