

Heptonstall

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This is the writer's journey, a poet's pilgrimage to visit a grave of no relation in blood or name, paying homage to one who died upon her pen. Armed with my camera, an old writer's journal, a worn copy of *Ariel* and packed lunch, I caught the early morning bus to take me across Yorkshire's flint and moor, its gorges and deep valleys, under a low sky full of unwashed sheep's wool, as grey and damp and stark as a heart. By Hebden Bridge the June sun cleared herded clouds as a quick-witted sheepdog would, the small town of clean, quarried stone looking bright as the bus took its pivot at a turning circle, ascending a steep ridge known as 'the Buttress', up into the hilltop village of long dead men pretending they are in heaven.

Heptonstall, place of black brick, terraced houses in bleak, curving lines that climb a cobbled incline, forgotten by time as if the industrial age had not quite left, and the hand-loom weaving of its past still took place in its cottages. I step off the bus, a familiar anchor leaving me behind as I realise I am rather lost, not sure what I have come for. At the Post Office, I ask for directions taking me along the gravestone path of a ruin; a dinosaur skeleton of the first St. Thomas a Becket Church. The flat graves here are far too old, their dates spin back into unknown centuries. As I stumble and lurch a young woman calls out, she knows what I have come for. *Oh, I'll show you where it is*, she says, takes me through a wrought-iron gate to a newer cemetery behind a second church.

She ushers me to the narrow plot in this long row of neat headstones, the plot from which a village takes its unwanted fame. I bid her thanks, stand in this place not quite untenanted but founded on horizontals who stake their claim underground. Before me the unassuming grave, with its stump of a headstone in white granite which has greyed by the constant beating of rain. On it a harsh font, black and monolithic, as though there could be no uncertainty as to her lying there. Few words are used, as though in irony of the one for whom words were better than blood. Thus her name, appended, the bookended dates, and a line from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Before it a marble vase is full of pale pink carnations that are bent and scalded,



not quite the shocking pink of azaleas, but pared to white, the skin of a dead woman. Outstretched from stone the plot of soil is sunken in that awful, particular way of graves. The sad untended earth is weed-full, and the grasses which skirt it are as high as the headstone. Before this altar I crouch, take out her book and from it read her words as an incantation, axes falling and echoing through the years. But such words lack flesh, lack blood, lack bone, so thin that the wind swallowed them.

This place is a ruin, tucked behind modern houses and hidden by a boundary of vast, sepulchral trees. High grasses sprout about the neat rows of graves, weeds and shrubs displace old granite and marble, knotted brambles and malignant rosebushes shroud the dead. All looks weathered, slanted, the neglect of an unvisited kingdom. From behind it the moors, verdant and unceasing, spread out as a formidable battlement to the outside world. And such a burden of silence; the hum of dragon flies, bees, and hornets, the low, raucous caw of rooks, the rattle of magpies, the shushing of leaves, the shrill crow of a cockerel. The overcast sky is a plumage of charcoal and black, clouds feathery and torn by rain pouring down in ragged sheets. Squat beneath an umbrella I sit it out, scribbling such coincidences and images in my book.



The rain weakens and comes to a halt, clouds part as a white hot sun bursts into pink-tinged flames, a golden lotus within a sky of grey, dying blooms. The leaves and grasses about me drip in a solemn, baleful hymn, lanterns of green as though lit within, and headstones gleam, worn teeth in mossy gums. A visitor appears, with pewter pot, gloved hands, a trowel and secateurs. She nods to me and smiles, ambles over to a nearby plot and begins to tidy it. Where are the poet's relatives to tend her grave? Her children who once played here, placing their Devonshire pebbles and shells in sad little patterns to decorate her resting place. Perhaps no one visits this painful corner of earth except strangers who never knew her in life, paying our humble respects. Perhaps forgetfulness is the terrible lot of the dead. Again the sun blinks, blotted out by a lid of cloud, and the church belfry sounds twice its pitiful song, never resting for those who cannot rest in peace. The thunder cackles out on the moors, as a rook flies, steadying herself against oncoming torrents.

