



S A M T A Y L O R - W O O D Yes I No

MOOR GHOSTS

'Catherine's face was just like the landscape – shadows and sunshine flitting over it, in rapid succession; but the shadows rested longer and the sunshine was more transient...'

– Emily Brontë – *Wuthering Heights*

A short while before Sam Taylor-Wood embarked on her expedition to Yorkshire, to shoot a series of photographs on the moors that inspired the Brontës, we talked about what she might find there. I said that *Wuthering Heights* was as much a state of mind as a stated place – an emotional landscape reflected in this wild terrain – and she said, 'Yes, that's it, that's what I'm looking for.'

I have known Sam for over a decade now – we first met at the beginning of 1998, when she was recovering from surgery for colon cancer, and I was grieving for my sister, who had just died of breast cancer – and over the subsequent years, it has always struck me that she is an artist who never stops looking *for* things (and people, and ideas), as well as *at* them. She has a mercurial, restless intelligence; or what her friend and former partner, Jake Chapman, has described as 'a tendency towards flight', a swift-moving curiosity that means she never stands still (literally, as well as intellectually). Thus Sam is hard to pin down, though when she concentrates on an idea, or a person, or a piece of work she wants to make, her focus is intense; she becomes unstoppable. Yet all of that powerful determination never seems to obscure her sight; she is able to see things for what they are, as well as what they might become.

The catalyst for our conversation about the moors was that Sam had just finished reading *Wuthering Heights* for the first time, and was struck by how remarkably different it was to her expectations of a novel more often represented as romantic. 'It was so remorseless,' she said. 'I picked it up on a winter's evening in Yorkshire, when the wind was howling and rattling at the windows, which was exactly the right place to read it. And even though it's usually seen as a romance, what you find are two hateful characters. Heathcliff is a sadist who hangs dogs and beats children, and Cathy is a manipulative monster. But at the same time, the story leaves you with a sense of such painfully heightened love – and such passion – set against an equally powerful landscape.'

With this in mind, Sam set off from Haworth on a raw, sleeting March day, following the footpath from the stone parsonage where the Brontës lived and died, up across the moors to Top Withens, a ruined farmhouse reputed, by local legend, to have inspired the setting of *Wuthering Heights*. Certainly, its remote and windswept position, high in the hills above Haworth, seems close to that described by Emily Brontë in the opening pages of her novel:

'Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr Heathcliff's dwelling, "Wuthering" being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few, stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun...'

Sam did not have to guess at the power of the north wind. 'I've never been so cold in my entire life as I was up there,' she said to me, soon after her return from the moors. But despite the deathly chill, she found the wuthering weather as exhilarating as it is in Emily Brontë's novel. 'Going into that landscape makes you feel so alive. Yes, it's bleak, and it's barren – but it's not dead. There's torrential rain, and horizontal sleet, and the wind – I was trying to photograph the wind, trying to get a sense of the wildness of the air.'

You can feel this in her resultant pictures, 'Ghosts', where the sky comes gloriously alive with light, and the clouds and the grass seem to reach out to each other. It is an unpeopled landscape, with only a solitary sheep taking shelter from the wind, yet these photographs are never empty; just as *Wuthering Heights* is filled with whispers of the dead calling out to the living, and the cries of the living for those they have lost.

Looking at her series made me return to *Wuthering Heights* – which is as it should be – both in my imagination, and leafing through the pages of my battered paperback, read and re-read over the years. And so I came again to the scene when Heathcliff declares of Cathy, 'You know, I was wild after she died, and eternally, from dawn to dawn, praying her to return to me – her spirit – I have a strong faith in ghosts; I have a conviction that they can, and do exist, among us!' Such is his tempestuous longing for her that he tries to dig up her dead body from beneath the ground – 'I'll have her in my arms again! If she be cold, I'll think it is this north wind that chills me...' Yet Heathcliff is looking for her in the wrong place, for Cathy is in and of the wind, not rotting and confined to a coffin:

'There was another sigh, close at my ear. I appeared to feel the warm breath of it displacing the sleet-laden wind. I knew no living thing in flesh and blood was by – but as certainly as you perceive the approach to some substantial body in the dark, though it cannot be discerned, so certainly I felt that Cathy was there, not under me, but on the earth.'

Sam's pictures also seem to contain within them other echoes (or the shadows of moor ghosts); of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, who walked the same footpath as she did to Top Withens, on their own *Wuthering Heights* pilgrimage. In September 1961, a year and a half before her suicide, Plath wrote a poem – entitled 'Wuthering Heights' – about that visit:

*'... and the wind
Pours by like destiny, bending
Everything in one direction...
Of people the air only
Remembers a few odd syllables...'*

Later, Ted Hughes – one of Sam's favourite poets (a man with a fierce attachment to life, even when confronted by death) – wrote his version, another poem called 'Wuthering Heights', as if continuing the conversation with his dead wife:

*'... You perched
In one of the two trees
Just where the snapshot shows you...
... The moor-wind
Came with its empty eyes to look at you...
And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,
Peered from the broken mullions...'*

Looking at Sam's picture of the two trees, you wonder if the conversation remains unfinished, with the poets' words whispering through the branches; and you may even feel that if you looked long enough, you might just catch a glimpse of the faces of those women who once walked here – of Sylvia Plath, and Emily Brontë, and Catherine Earnshaw.

This is the achievement of 'Ghosts': the subtle suggestion that in death, there is still life; that looking into the past, one might see the outline of the future; that the voices of now-dead writers can be heard, in a place that bears witness to them in all kinds of quiet ways. That the pictures can convey this is due in part, perhaps, to their dream-like quality – for they share something of the dream-like state of *Wuthering Heights* itself, a world apart from the rest of the world, operating according to its own language and laws, and its own, very particular, geography. At one point in the novel, Cathy declares, 'I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they've gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind.'

Those words seem to be captured in Sam's photographs – though 'captured' is possibly the wrong description, for a more delicate, fleeting process of dream-catching; in particular, her picture entitled *Ghosts III*, where a blue stream runs through the land, like a vein of blue blood, with an otherworldly tint. And as with dreams, there is also a sense of fluidity, a recognition that here is a place without conventional boundaries: yet another reflection and refraction of *Wuthering Heights*, a novel that often returns to the idea that we cannot lock each other in, or out, however many bars and doors are fastened. Hence at the beginning of the book, one of its narrators – Lockwood, a visitor from the outside world, and seemingly the most conventional of men – describes his enforced overnight stay at Wuthering Heights, and what he calls a dream, yet which has the vivid immediacy of a real physical encounter. Cathy's ghost – a child with 'a little ice-cold hand' – reaches in through a broken window, and takes hold of Lockwood's fingers. At first, he had believed her knocking to be that of a branch of a fir bough (the same trees, perhaps, that we see in Sam's pictures, still standing even though the farmhouse walls have crumbled and fallen) but then, with 'the intense horror of nightmare', Lockwood discovers that it is a ghost who cannot be locked out:

"Let me in – let me in," she cries. "I'm come home, I'd lost my way on the moor!"

'As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window – Terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrists on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed, "Let me in!" ...'

It is a scene of shocking violence, all the more so for being enacted by what appears to be an innocuous character. This vivid episode has haunted successive generations of readers with such power that Emily Brontë's masterpiece has become mythic, and in the process, acquired layers of accretions in the form of adaptations and reinterpretations (films, plays, sequels, pop songs). Most of these have only diluted the original novel, like adding water to wine – as if in an attempt to tame it, to make its dark transgressions safe again, so that Cathy and Heathcliff's dangerous, semi-incestuous passion has been watered down to become emblematic of a less unsettling romantic love.

But Sam Taylor-Wood has responded to *Wuthering Heights* in a far more interesting way: without melodrama or dilution, but letting it run through her, untrammelled, like a dream. She also unlocks what Lockwood seeks to close at the end of the novel, in his assertion that the ghosts of Cathy and Heathcliff are safely shut away beneath the ground, as he regards their graves:

'I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth.'

Sam's pictures suggest that the imagination is freer than that; as free to roam as the spirits of the dead; free as the wind that breathes through the grass.

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