

Long Paddock

GONZALO MELCHOR

Lens

1

In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, when Heathcliff hears of his beloved Catherine's death, he yells and curses madly, stomps his foot and groans *in a sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion*.

A sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion.

Is that possible?

Can a man – even a man like Heathcliff – utter such a groan?

A helpful rule-of-thumb is: in any relation between two terms, if the first term can't be substituted for its opposite without the expression collapsing into an oxymoron, then the original relation is shown up as a tautology.

For example: a bad evildoer (original tautology) vs. a ~~bad~~ *good* one (resulting oxymoron).

So:

1. Heathcliff groaned in a ~~sudden~~ *gradual* paroxysm of ~~ungovernable~~ *meek* passion.

Could a paroxysm ever come in steps? And what kind of *real* passion would allow itself to be summoned and led around?

2. Heathcliff groaned in a ~~paroxysm~~ *stillness* of passion.

3. He groaned in ~~passion~~ *indifference*.

4. Heathcliff groaned.

Period. And maybe that's enough: next to the ash tree where he'd been banging his forehead all night, leaving bloodstains on the trunk, as Brontë savagely says – there, upon hearing of the death of his beloved, whose ghost would haunt him till his last day on earth, Heathcliff *groaned*.

2

Over a century and a half after Brontë's specter-haunted maniac first prowled the foggy moors of Yorkshire, Julio Ruedas, my great uncle, threw himself from a truck that was carting him and a bunch of other pale-faced shaven-haired soldiers to Barcelona and fell into a soggy ditch. He rolled over leaves and cow shit, split his lower lip on a rock, and then peered up and watched as the truck spluttered on along the road, its green back dwindling until all that was left was a trail of smoke from the banging exhaust.

Then Julio got up, wiped the dust off himself, and in the middle of the Spanish Civil War, walked three hundred kilometers back to Madrid.

He got to Plaza de la Independencia a week later, and instead of going in he stood and leant against the side of the building, and waited for five hours, unshaven, reeking, with a bloodied lip, as ravenous as a stray dog, until Maribel came down the stairs with a letter in an envelope she intended to stamp and mail to him.

And having scripted the line over and over in his head for seven days, he grabbed her arm and said, *I'll take that*.

3

I'd like to compare Julio's gesture with Heathcliff's. I think they both spring from the same urge.

Consider what happened to Julio next: after the kisses and hair-pulling (for she did, Maribel pulled Julio's hair, clawed at his face and neck!), the couple ran inside past José the doorman and up the stairs and into Maribel's family's apartment – and then Julio made a mistake: he confessed he was famished.

Hambriento, he panted, as he'd never been before in his life.

So Maribel made him sit down on the couch and quickly went into the kitchen and prepared a chorizo sandwich.

About to faint, with his butt comfortably hugged by a soft cushion, Julio gazed down at what was suddenly deposited on his lap: a lonely sandwich, on a plate.

Unaccountably, Julio's hunger, his exhaustion, the cottony feeling on his behind, were replaced by disappointment, and fury.

I'll get you some water! Maribel said, her wrists still trembling with excitement.

4

After a week of trekking across Spain, crossing rivers and hills and towns where hundreds were being lined up against walls and shot – dark-sunned towns where priests were being made to swallow crucifixes, where laborers and aristocrats alike were being impaled alive and hung from trees – after seven days of crawling on all fours and running and skirting a populace gone feral with loathing and vengefulness, Julio was faced with a chorizo sandwich on a plate.

And why not?

What did Julio expect?

A bubbling cheese fondue? Wine, and silver bowls stacked with fruit, and melted chocolate?

No: what Julio wanted, and what Heathcliff wanted as he stomped his foot and smashed his head again and again on that tree – what the Nationalists and Republicans wanted as they marched across a darkening Spain, and what I wanted when I started this story – was for their will, and the expression of that will in the world, *to match*.

The way two mechanisms rotate, slide and couple with a perfect *click*: a dream of identity.

An A=A, the perfect tautology, so full of itself as to burst its seams and turn a moment into something more, something *momentous*, choked with itself, smothered in redundancy and excess!

5

But now think of Heathcliff.

Because, after however many hours (we only know for certain that it was shortly after dawn), he left the ash tree alone and dragged himself back to his manor.

And yet we never hear of his walk back home.

We don't hear of the March sun rising over the moor, nor of what Heathcliff did as he journeyed across it.

And maybe, while Heathcliff wiped off his tears, he also picked his nose. Or snorted snot into the wet grass. Maybe he stepped on a puddle and his boot got waterlogged, so that every time Heathcliff stepped a squelch was heard in the moor, a squelch that maybe started pushing Catherine's death out of Heathcliff's consciousness, squelch, step, *squelch* – until Heathcliff had to wrench his boot off and pour the mud and water out and still after he shoved it back on it made *that noise!*

I'd like to call that noise *the universal squelch*, which we all make, as we go about our businesses on earth.

And it is precisely this – the squelching boot, the fishbone stuck into the flesh of every moment, deflating it of momentousness – that is everywhere skipped, covered up with tape, suppressed: by me, by you, by Emily Brontë.

What's wrong? Maribel asked anxiously, seeing Julio's pale jaw-clenched face.

Nada, nada.

Julio waved away his inexplicably fury, and felt how, in betrayal of his tautological desires, his gums were salivating.

I felt weak. Just needed a moment.

And then Julio picked up the sandwich and sunk his teeth into the bread.

It was good. So good. In fact, after seven days of eating raw corn and onions, Maribel's sandwich was so mouth-wateringly good that Julio couldn't help it when breadcrumbs started spilling on his lap and shirt – a few stuck to Julio's chin – and went up and down, up and down, as he chewed voraciously.

Maribel sat next to him on the sofa, and watched with awe, her chest almost exploding with love: Julio returned to her, bruised but healthy, intact!

At first Maribel tried to ignore them, those silly breadcrumbs. But then, as Julio kept eating, her mind like a loosening suction cap unstuck itself slightly from the moment and began to think of ways to tell Julio, hint, *my love you have...* or *could you...* only so that she could *truly* watch him: because the scabby blood on Julio's lip was fine, as was his unwashed hair, even the sweat and manure stink coming from his shirt – but not the crumbs. Not those crumbs, moving up and down like that.

1. Six slices of pig meat.
2. A finger; a nose.
3. Snot on wet grass.
4. A puddle.
5. A squelching boot.
6. A mess of crumbs.

To this catalogue of unwanted objects, I'd like to add:

7. Ouzel droppings.

and:

8. 300,000 slaves.

(In fact, I would like to add so many items that the list would saturate the page and spill over its wealth of rejected details, like a mutiny in a prison: all the pulled-out threads woven back into the texture of experience!)

Catherine died on March 20, 1784. Exactly a week later, on a Friday, her funeral was held, and her remains were buried on a grassy slope in a corner of the churchyard.

During that interim week, we are told that Heathcliff went back every night to his spot in the park, and watched the yellow windows of the house from afar: Catherine's body lay in a coffin under a swathe of flowers, next to her husband, who sat on a chair day and night, his chin next to his chest, his eyes scarcely open.

An ouzel is a species of European thrush. Black and tiny, with a white bib across its chest, it eats worms, spiders, insects and moorland berries. It arrives in England in late March, and migrates towards the Mediterranean in late September.

The first night Heathcliff hid in the park – before his cursing and groaning – Brontë says he had his hat off, and stood immobile, so that a pair of ouzels flew about *three feet from him*. They had just arrived in the moorland and were collecting sticks for their nest.

For seven nights, Heathcliff stood under that tree: both lofty and evil, hatless, his long black hair and freezing nose wet with dew, his dark demented eyes fixed upon the house windows – when one or both ouzels defecated, as they had to, at some point, in seven days.

And their droppings fell on Heathcliff.

Did he notice?

No, I don't think so – not in his state: he merely stood, one of literature's grieving monsters, for the rest of that night, eyes reflecting the softly lit windows, while two splotches of gray slime slid slowly down his head.

But you're being unfair! one could say.

Meaning: is that the way to approach human grief?

No, of course not: I'm focusing on accidental objects, my camera zooming in on extraneous, irrelevant details – the extras on a shot, the faceless blur, two birds nesting on a tree branch – by approaching Heathcliff *too* slantedly, I've *missed* him altogether.

But then, zooming out, beyond England, to encompass the map of Britain: would you need to know (as regards Heathcliff's grief) that in the same year of Catherine's death, 1784, a nascent balloonomania was sending hot air balloons into the British skies?

Or that the obese Samuel Johnson died of congestive heart failure that same year – when C27H46O, or cholesterol, was also first isolated?

Or that by 1784 more than a quarter of a million slaves had been bound to chains and shipped from Bristol and Liverpool on to the New World – so profitably, in fact, that the English economy, which Heathcliff and Catherine were a part of, couldn't have ground its wheels without the sweat on their black bodies?

The answer would be: if before I was too close – who cares about bird shit in Heathcliff's hair, when the love of his life is dead, when suffering literally immobilizes him – now I'm observing with too weak a lens, from too far away.

To get it right I must calibrate my perspective.

Or, put differently: evil, *the devil's sin, is an error of perspective.*

The philosopher Ortega y Gasset, Julio's contemporary, thought and wrote so, and perhaps accordingly exiled himself from Spain in the fall of 1936.

This is what the socialist authorities in Madrid had to say:

May Don Ortega y Gasset rest in complete peace, abroad, and in the company of his family! The new world being forged in Spain does not need them.

It did need, however, Julio.

Or that's what the two militiamen who stood at the door later that night said.

One was tall, and wore a wispy not-yet-fully-grown mustache, like something drawn on him by a child. The other was short, with a flat fleshy nose that covered too much of his face. Both their eyes were black, nervous, alert. They were young, their uniforms stank of sweat, like Julio's.

The tall one made a gesture with the gun in his hand, as if weighing it, and explained that José, the doorman, had informed them of Julio's return.

Then the other one added, with a small, perhaps unconscious, smile in the corner of his mouth:

And we need you to come with us.

Suddenly, Julio headbutted the shorter one on the face – even before he finished his sentence – and, shoving the tall one's gangly arms off himself, pushed through and ran, the only thing he could think off: *run*, down the stairs, down toward José's desk and the frosted glass on the front door and the cool night air outside.

Of the two it was the taller one who reacted in time: he kicked away his companion – who stood in the way moaning and holding his bloody face in his hands – and, balanced on the staircase railing, fired: the bullet hit Julio in the back of the head.

He fell, rolled down the stairs and stopped at the bottom: Julio's body, crookedly sprawled.

Up on the landing, this is what the militiaman felt: not a single crease, or wrinkle, from the passage of time: only his self and the world closing in, his black eyes frozen in a single glimmering perspective: an airtight embrace, with nothing unwanted, or rough, or squelching, or mismatched in between – only his beating heart, pumping more and more blood into the moment.

And Maribel?

She breathed, breathed louder and louder till screaming she ran past the now slack-limbed killer and went down the stairs and held Julio's head in her hands, not knowing how else to hold him, touch him, to stop the blood dripping through her fingers onto the floor.

And then?

After the militiamen left, and the tall one had slapped the moaning short one on the shoulder – *come on, we're not done yet* – and brought out a folded piece of paper and scanned a list of names – after the sun came up the next day – what did Maribel do?

I could write: she cursed, she stomped her foot and groaned in a sudden parox –

Or I could write: she was left, disconsolate.

With the memory of Julio eating a sandwich, with bread crumbs on his chin.