

1981

Travel Notes

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Recommended Citation

Cliff, Michelle. "Travel Notes." *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981): 32-35. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2683>

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Travel Notes · *Michelle Cliff*

I wanted to be the lone figure on the landscape.
The cat burglar passing silent in the night.
The fast driver—unaffiliated—unnoticed.
This is not how it is.

Sometimes I see a small house—sometimes shacks attract me. I wonder how it would be to live hidden.

I am standing in the doorway of the dining room at Haworth Parsonage. *My sister Emily loved the moors. . . . Out of a sullen hollow in a livid hill-side, her mind could make an Eden.* —I stare at the horsehair sofa where Emily Brontë died.

Outside are the thousands of graves. Wind and rain obscuring the vision. Mosses cross the outer walls.

While inside glass cases display the tiny notebooks filled with stories. The needlework of the sisters.

Downstairs is the souvenir kiosk. The portraits of Keeper, Grasper, the hawk Hero. Views of the moors—heather—gorse. Top Withens. Kitchen. Churchyard. *She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best-loved was—liberty. Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils.*

Across from this kiosk is a bulletin board advising women of the existence of the Yorkshire Ripper and the necessity that we remain indoors.

The North Wind demolished their already weakened lungs—Anne and Emily. Charlotte died of pregnancy. Branwell of opium and drink. The old man of old age. Much earlier a mother and two other sisters: cancer, consumption, typhoid.

Back home—I find a suspect has been caught. He kept to himself. He was a shy man. He and his wife had no children. The police have his wife under guard. There are threats on her life.

“But we already know that women are oppressed,” the student said to me. “I had hoped this course would deal with something else.”

How do we keep their attention?
Our own.

As a child I saved maps. Haunted airports. Begged for travel brochures and posters of bazaars and castles. I wanted to go overseas. Always looked forward.

Traveling through my own time I often look back.

I am in Brighton where England's Neo-Nazis have headquarters. Where Fanny Imlay—Wollstonecraft's daughter—killed herself, wearing her mother's watch and undergarment. (Godwin did not claim her body, ashamed at her method of death.)

Brighton is an hour from Lewes—where Virginia Woolf walked into the River Ouse. I think about a memoir written by Woolf's cook—Louie Mayer—how she described the last afternoon: as Virginia wandered through the garden, bumping into branches. And Leonard suggested Virginia dust—but she lost interest.

These details crowd me.

What is left of Wollstonecraft's grave is a plaque by King's Cross Station.

In King's Cross once I saw a woman in the ladies' room—a large naked white woman accompanied by her belongings. She was standing in a corner against a wall, calmly washing herself. Wetting and soaping and drying herself with brown paper.

Other women came and went.

As a child I pressed my fingers against my closed eyes—watched the stars, planets, comets, and meteorites move against them. As if I could contain the universe behind my eyelids.

It is the anniversary of the first imprisonment of suffragists —
Annie Kenney and Cristabel Pankhurst.
Someone has left a bouquet of irises — purple
tied with ribbon — green:
the colors of the movement.

These lie in front of Emmeline Pankhurst's statue which stands to the side of the Houses of Parliament. The note attached to the bouquet is in a strong and older hand — perhaps of a woman who actually remembers 1905. The ink runs in the drizzle.

Now the meaning of green ribbon has shifted. They are killing black children in Atlanta — also elsewhere. Georgia Dean, a retired factory worker, suggests wearing an inverted V of green — the color of growing things.

Each newspaper report seems more clouded than before: today they claimed the children died at the hands of a "gentle" killer: does this translate as female? homosexual?

What are they getting at?

The Mark of the Beast — a special issue on the Klan. On the cover a member clasps a child; his eyes seem hollowed — the child's, I mean — the member is a woman.

I meet two women in Texas — they live on a farm in a small town north of Austin. Outside their kitchen is a pile of rocks where their cat stares down a diamondback.

They prepare a noose of cord — slide one rock back. The diamondback raises her head to strike. They slide the noose around her neck.

She stretches to her length. "Four feet of solid muscle" — one woman explains.

They place the snake in a garbage can — secure its lid by rope.

There is another snake in the rockpile — then another.

“We’re lucky we had seven cans,” says one woman—and a pickup to drive the diamondbacks twenty-five miles away and let them go: one by one.

A solid day’s work.