

2017

What Binds Them Together

Rachael Peckham

Marshall University, peckham@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/english_faculty



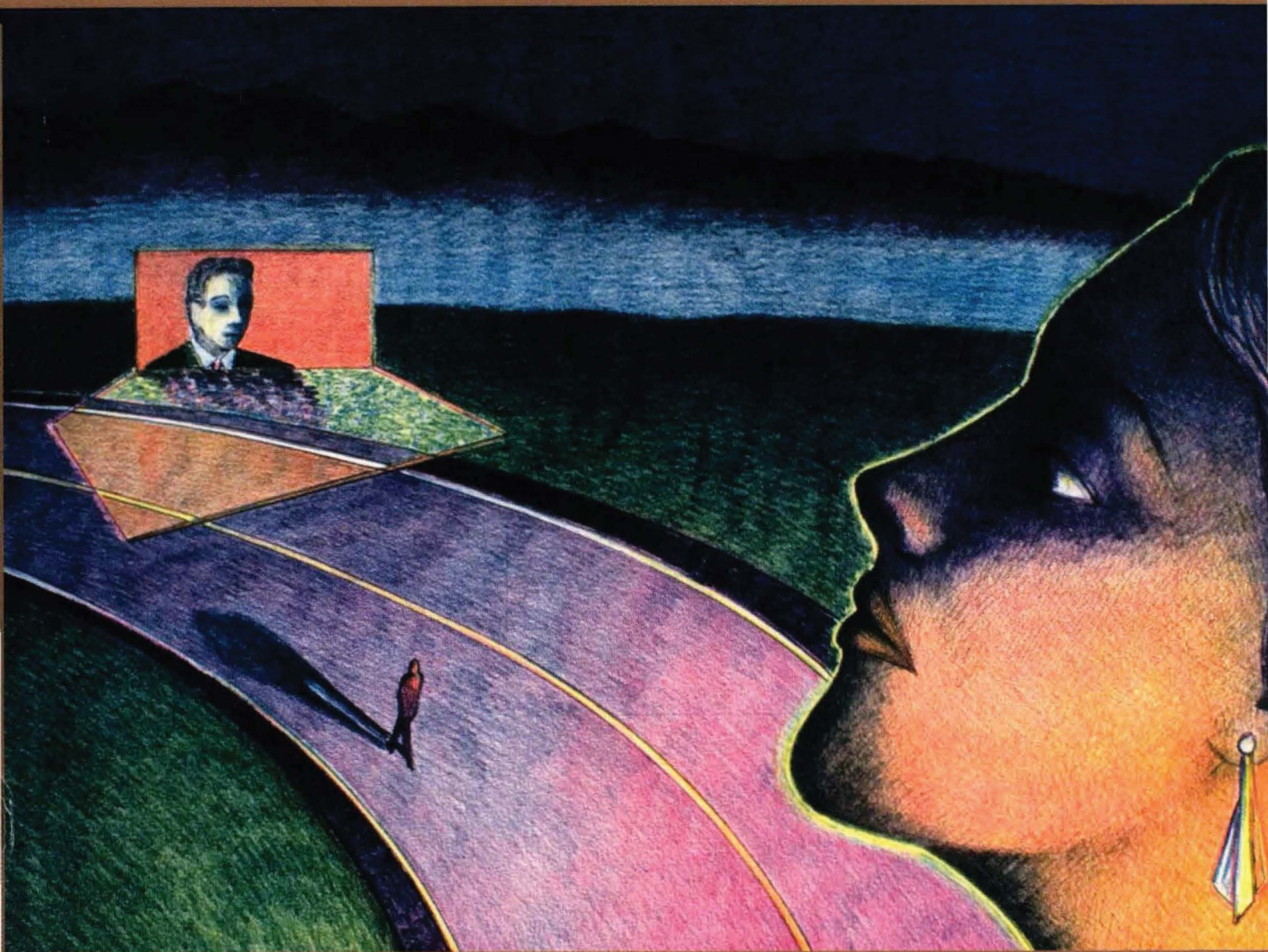
Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peckham, Rachael. "What Binds Them Together." *New Ohio Review*, no. 22, 2017, pp. 150-153.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu, martj@marshall.edu.

New Ohio Review



NOR 22

FEATURE
Of Essays and Exes

What Binds Them Together

Rachael Peckham

When a MacArthur grant-winning poet and classicist writes about her ex-lover, she doesn't commit a "thick stacked act of revenge" against him, a tempting "vocation of anger" enacted on the page. Yet Anne Carson, author of "The Glass Essay" (from the collection *Glass, Irony, and God*), knows it's "easier to tell a story of how people wound one another than of what binds them together." It makes sense. Where there's an *ex*, there's the story of a relationship—a clear beginning, middle, and the dreaded end, with a natural protagonist in *us* versus *them*, the Exes.

That said, Carson's "The Glass Essay," which begins with the speaker's losing sleep over an ex named Law, can hardly be called a clear or easy break-up story. In fact, it's not a story at all but an essay *in verse*—one that doesn't mention him much. Perhaps it's no surprise that *it's not about him* (is it ever, with the essay?) but about her. About several *hers*, actually; Carson oscillates between "three silent women" each struggling, each alone or left behind in love. It's loss that *binds them together*.

And who are *they*? First, there's the speaker (I prefer poetry's simpler term over nonfiction's *I-character*), still reeling from that "stunning moment . . . when one's lover comes in and says I don't love you anymore," and who subsequently escapes to visit her mother "on a moor in the north." Then there's the speaker's mother, herself, holding court in the kitchen about the ripeness of melons; women's increasingly risqué fashions; and most of all, her daughter's depressive state ("Well that psychotherapy's not doing you much good is it? / You aren't getting over him"). This, until the mother and daughter's ritual trip to the hospital where her husband/the speaker's father—and a former WWII hero; a navigator, no less—slips further beneath the "slow avalanche" of dementia.

Finally, there's Emily Brontë, the speaker's simultaneous "favourite author / [and] main fear," whose *Collected Works* provides not welcome diversion but a dogged preoccupation with love and loneliness and the struggle to recover from both. While the question Carson poses of Brontë, who famously died an unwed

introvert, is one we've heard before ("What did Emily know of lover's lies or cursive human faith?"), here there's a sense of urgency behind it, vocalized by a speaker earnestly trying to understand "the imperatives / that hold people like Catherine and Heathcliff / together and apart."

People like Catherine and Heathcliff. What can two fictional characters drawn nearly two centuries ago teach us about modern love and loss? Plenty, Carson suggests, and I can't help but read into this reading of Brontë, looking for those desires and frustrations that Carson seems to recognize in *Wuthering Heights*—especially in "the way [Brontë's] characters / use one another," sabotaging their own happiness in the process (Carson calls Heathcliff "a pain devil" whose "inner cruelty" made him so). In short, it's a self-destructive love. And while Carson and Brontë appear very different from one another, living in different time periods, with vastly different experiences, the reclusive author of *Wuthering Heights* stirs up a deep-seated fear in the speaker of "The Glass Essay": "Whenever I visit my mother / I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë." Not *turning into my mother*, as the clichéd phrase goes. No, the mother *turns her into Brontë*. What's so bad about being Brontë? Carson: "She didn't have friends, children, sex, religion, marriage, success, a salary / or a fear of death." Okay, there's *that*. But complicating that list, for Carson, are all the ways nineteenth-century England (i.e., the patriarchy) helped build a cage around Brontë, whose work "from beginning to end is concerned with prisons." The observation acts as a bridge, allowing Carson to make the associative leap and examine her own subjection under Law:

I don't want to be sexual with you, he said. Everything gets crazy.
But now he was looking at me.
Yes, I said, as I began to remove my clothes. [. . .]

Everything I know about love and its necessities
I learned in that one moment
when I found myself

thrusting my little burning red backside like a baboon
at a man who no longer cherished me.
There was no area of my mind

not appalled by this action, no part of my body
that could have done otherwise.

Carson's essay is clearly unflinching, visceral about the experience of loss (and loss of self), but many of us have experienced this reckoning. I did (*it's everything I know about love*), and it was a time when intimacy and pain became so bound up in each other, I could no longer tell the difference. When breaking up meant more than a separation from my lover—it divided my very thought and action, so that I no longer recognized what I was doing, and by extension, *who I was*. Because when we gain an *ex*, we can temporarily lose our sense of self—a crisis of identity (*I am turning into Emily Brontë*) that would suggest it's not our lovers but we who are *ex-ed*, estranged from ourselves.

At the same time, there's nothing like heartbreak to link us together, to help us transcend time and place and all the "prisons" that would otherwise contain us. For as much as "The Glass Essay" is about a breakup, it's also about every silent woman's struggle to *break out* of the narratives that entrap them in passive roles, positioned to always "whach" (Brontë's word) and wait to be acted upon. Carson can't seem to stop *watching* the final scenes of the break-up, when Law makes love to her repeatedly and then leaves, and what she ultimately sees, she admits, is melodramatic. It's the shape of her soul dying, and that vision is at the center of the essay. She calls these shapes *Nudes*, and they come to her during meditation:

I began telling Dr. Haw

about the Nudes. She said,

When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them?

Why keep watching? Why not

go away? I was amazed.

Go away where? I said.

Certainly, the mind can be its own prison, in which traumatic images come to us unbidden—but more than that, these images deserve consideration because they're not of Law, as we might expect in an essay about an *ex*. Rather, they're of a particular kind of *pain* made visible in "The Glass Essay," and not necessarily just the speaker's pain; several of the *Nudes* seem to be embodiments of collective pain rather than individual pain. *Nude #1*, for instance, "stands in the wind [. . .] an exposed column of nerve and blood and muscle." With this one figure, Carson must want us to think of herself, and of her mother and Brontë, alone on the moors.

More than the ambiguity of these figures, what's significant is the way Carson subverts the nude's function in art. No longer an expression of an idealized beauty of the (female) body, here the Nudes are anything but beautiful—or if they are, it's a brutal (and brutalized) beauty, stripped away so that the eye can behold the raw viscera beneath. Neither are the Nudes static objects for us to gaze at pleasurably, up close; they blow away, they burn, they're "backlit in red." Always, some violence is being enacted upon them, usually by threats that are natural, like wind, fire, and water. Whatever the threat, in each vision the *soul* is up against an indomitable external force.

Perhaps it's not that bold or surprising for Carson, a poet, to express these feelings of woundedness and vulnerability ("not uncommon after loss of love") through the image of the Nudes, but it is striking how the metaphor underscores the essay's more discursive points about how grief debases desire, reducing it to something wild and desperate, futile and mutually destructive:

In the days and months after Law left
I felt as if the sky was torn off my life.
I had no home in goodness anymore.

To see the love between Law and me
turn into two animals gnawing and craving through one another
towards some other hunger was terrible.

This combination of metaphor and meditation, exes and intertextuality (Brontë's lines are woven throughout Carson's)—it's this alchemy of subjects and technique that *binds the essay together*, and Carson depicts, painfully, what was feared broken or lost. By the end, it's no longer about the breakup. The ex is ex-ed. Law is long gone, and Carson concludes "The Glass Essay" with a vision of Nude #13, a glimpse of a new *self* indeed scathed but resolved to move forward, cleansed from pain: "It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all. / It walked out of the light."

In other words, Anne Carson shows us a way out—not around suffering, but quite literally *through* it. We, each one of us, can shake free of our "pain devils," our prisons. Unbound, we can walk the moor *and* climb down from it—alone, maybe, but still alive. In a new light. Not ourselves, exactly, but not anyone else, either—not Brontë, or our mothers, or the selves we had to leave *back there*, bent before our exes.