

## Hampstead Heath: A Sketch

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Natania Rosenfeld

Recovering from a stomach flu like a hurricane, I board a double-decker bus for Hampstead Heath. I want fresh air, and to see other people enjoying themselves. My man and I hold hands, and I sit very still.

On a twisting street somewhere between Bloomsbury and Hampstead, I look out and see a woman leaning from an upstairs window, slightly above my eye level. A girl, really, in bright pink pyjamas, the top a camisole edged in black lace. A cross hangs from her neck. Shall I add a cigarette to the description? There might well have been one.

The Heath is calm on a spring afternoon. White fluff floats in the air, the seeds of some plant vigorously reproducing itself. Fathers play hide-and-seek with children while mothers talk amongst themselves in the shade. We lie down in the unmown grass, and he reads aloud to me from *Daniel Deronda*. I catch a smell of cigarette ashes and beer, put up one forearm to shield my face from the sun.

After a while, we tire of George Eliot's loquacious narrator. We stroll to the pond, see the swans and cygnets floating, the parents a fortress to protect the gray little ones. Burly dogs run in to wet their feet, then come out shimmying and spraying. Owners tut, anticipating the mess back home. I am shaky still, and need to sit down.

On a bench by a path, we watch the Sunday parade. The English pick their way carefully; they don't stick their necks too far from their shells. But there is one man who wanders all over Hampstead—we've seen him earlier already, will see him

later—covered in bangles and bells. He is burly, the type Americans call “biker.” On one thick wrist he wears a huge plastic handcuff, links hanging from it in a chain like those in gaols of old. He walks where he pleases, shackle dangling.

A young couple pass, no older than twenty or twenty-two. The girl-woman is impossibly thin—emaciated as a dying person. She is blond, has put on a nice frock, some makeup. She is dying of either cancer or anorexia—almost certainly the latter. She barely has the strength to walk; her boyfriend reaches out an arm to help her keep up. But has he really noticed? Can he make love to this cadaverous body without pity, without horror? How dare he?

I have been vomiting unwillingly for days. I remember my student, so determined to be thin she’d vomit after every meal. I cannot fathom this young woman who looks like a corpse and can hardly totter on the path by the pond, yet apparently wants to be this way.

As a matter of fact, none of the flesh we see is pretty, whether thin or plump. The color is too white, too sun-deprived. In late May, England is still cold.

We walk slowly to a pub, where I observe the return of nausea. On the heels of such an illness, colors, surfaces, smells, and even words are unbearable. Whiffs of garbage and of other people’s bodies sicken me. I can hardly tolerate my own body, cannot imagine making love, much as I long for the comfort.

All the people dying in the newspapers, all the abject whom we ignore. I am one with them, briefly, and I cannot abide it.

Days later, I still think of them: the starving woman, the man in chains. The girl leaning out a window, looking for what, or whom? Her pale limbs, her hair raked back from the face in a ponytail. The life ahead of her.