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AT THE GRAVE OF GEORGE ELIOT

Laid in unconsecrated ground, a scandal still—note how good Gerard Hopkins recoiled from what a queer, awkward girl, frail-shouldered, massive, rickety, volcanic, out of an unconsecrated attachment, a marriage that was no marriage (one would have added, till opprobrium intervened, *but something better*), to a pockmarked lightweight of a drama critic, saw blossom: this domestic improbability, this moonflower. They were happy.

Happiness: *that*—as it always has been—was the scandal. As for the unembarrassed pursuit of same, run giddily amok, by now, among the lit-up purlieus of a game show (died of a conniption, beaming), time spared her that, though not the cold shoulder, the raw east wind, fog, the roar that issues from the other side of silence; not headache, kidney stone, the ravages of cancer—or of grief foreseen, met with, engulfed by, just barely lived through.

Nature (she'd written, year before) *repairs her ravages, but not all. The hills underneath their green vestures bear the marks of past rending.* Johnny Cross, younger by two decades, a banker, athletic, handsome, read Dante with her, fell in love; repeatedly, distressingly spoke of marriage, was at last accepted.

Another scandal—in the eyes of the devotees who looked on marrying at all with horror as for the breathing fishbowl of appearances. Grotesque, my dear. An episode in Venice on their honeymoon (who knows what makes any of us do what we do?) was somehow weathered. But in six months she was dead.

At Highgate, the day she was buried, a cold rain fell, mixed with snow. Slush underfoot. Mud tracked inside the chapel. Her brother Isaac, twenty-three years estranged (a ravage never healed), was there among the mourners—hordes of them, the weather notwithstanding. Edith Simcox, crazed with devotion to this woman who'd been, in her ill-favored way, so beautiful, arrived with a nosegay of violets, wandered off distracted into the dusk, came to herself finally at a station she didn't recognize, somewhere in Hampstead.

In rain-wet May, not quite a century later—cow parsley head-high, the unkempt walks a blur, faint drip of birdsong, ivy taking over—the stone is hard to find. Herbert Spencer, a creature of exemplary good sense, however ill-equipped for rapture, lies buried not far off, his monumental neighbor a likeness of Karl Marx, egregious in granite—godfather of such looked-for victories over incorrigible Nature, his memory red with nosegays ribboned in Chinese.

—AMY CLAMPITT

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