

Brontes

"I wish I had finished it." Diary entry made by Anne while writing *Agnes Grey*.

I

In childhood's lonely kingdom it was our comfort
to be each a queen in a presumptive sisterhood.

We broke free in sorties like the wilder goddesses,
reeling from the baize table, from Father's scattered homilies

through the cold parlour, trampling over, sidling round
memories of Mother thrown in our path like stitchery

(kerchiefs of domesticity we would not take up);
tip-toed past the brother whose untidy black body

sprawled in the schoolroom in a masculine knot
while his tongue thickly practised classical verse;

so we found out the moors, our wind-dizzy playground,
where we fluttered like kites as our minds learned to soar.

II

Years later, when the moors – like everywhere – had become
criss-crossed with failures like narrow paths much travelled,

we were blown home again, blown together by winters,
and we sat sighing or smiling and tilting our shadows

across snow-blank pages, where with deliberate black strokes
we turned daydreams to architecture, but broken like monasteries –

or like ourselves in age and in childlessness. Emily
bequeathed us all a labyrinth, where circular winds

chased down the generations, and predatory eyes
saw casements slam down on our bleeding ghosts;

Charlotte took local scarecrows, favoured the limp males,
and stuffed them full of bitter-sweetness as Christmas puddings -

to store in our doll's house of delusions concerning the rich.
I was the youngest. Pale-faced, I tried to echo their truth

in my stories, while my sick days closed about me like stones....
Sisters: closest to silence, I spoke only to mark the end.