

Freedom

*Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland small?
Only as a patch of hillside may be a cliché corner
To a fool who cries 'Nothing but heather!' where in September another
Sitting there and resting and gazing around
Sees not only the heather but the blueberries
With bright green leaves and leaves already turned scarlet
'Nothing but heather!'—How marvelously descriptive! And incomplete!*
—Hugh MacDiarmid in "Scotland Small?"

Standing on the edge, I looked at the drop off of the cliff. It was a thousand feet down, and it was a steep slope. Maybe rolling down the hill would be fun, if one didn't crack their head open on a boulder. The path we walked had the width of two feet. An incline stared down at us, and we stared down off the cliff. There was no turning back now after walking for an hour. The tour guide, who neglected to go on this hike with us, said the hardest part was just getting over the ridge. My friends and I did that: a sharp rise of a hundred feet and then it was more flat the rest of the way until we started moving down.

"You're going to love this," an overly excited girl said to me, gripping onto my backpack and then pushing off, almost shoving me off the cliff.

My eyes stared down. "No, I'm not." I refused to enjoy this; I refused to enjoy her.

It was a short walk to where we stood now, on the edge of the world. It spread out around me. The group was to meet back at the tour bus, near the ocean, and looking out, the ocean didn't seem that far away. I was wrong. It had to be at least two miles away on this four mile hike in Quiraring in the Highlands of Scotland.

With the elevation of 1,781 feet (583 meters), it is the highest summit of the Trotternish in the Isle of Skye, which rests in northern Scotland. Some spot of white snow still waited at the top to melt. Three main courses made Quiraring popular to hikers: the Needle, the Table and the Prison. The Needle is a pinnacle that stands 120 feet (37 meters) high. The Table is a flat, grassy surface. The Prison is pyramidal rocky peak that looks like an old medieval keep from a good angle. All of those things included more hiking, which I wasn't prepared to do. From where I stood, I was high enough.

I was on top of the world.

There wasn't exactly a place to sit to take it all in, but I wasn't sure if I could get back up after sitting. The grassy plains rolled on below me, billowing in the wind, and lapping like waves against the tan rocks. From up here, Scotland was everything. It continued to reach every corner of the earth. The water reached forward and collected Scotland, holding the lovely land in its smooth grasp. Thankfully the sun spread strikingly across the plains below and the path in front of us. Small clouds only darkened little pieces of property.

"Sophie, let's go!"

I didn't know why they were yelling at me when it was them who took forever. It was them who climbed onto the edges of the path and almost fell off. It was them who wanted me to go on this hike. I could have been down at the ocean's edge, reading a book and getting a tan. No, they said it would be fun; they were wrong. Originally I had said I didn't want to go on

this hike, but my friends convinced me to do it. Now, I complained every step of the way because they deserved it.

“You’ll be happy after you finish the hike,” Chloe said.

“Don’t tell me fucking lies,” I sneered. Even in a harsh whisper, my voice managed to ricochet off the mountains. It flowed into the valley.

“Just think, Sophie,” Chloe continued, “you could be doing the 96 mile hike.”

I thought about doing the 96 mile (154.5 kilometers) hike if I wanted to kill myself. The West Highland Way hike took on average six days. The walking path ran from Milngavie, north of Glasgow, to Fort William in the Scottish Highlands. About 80,000 people used the path each year, but only 15,000 people a year did the full route. The path moved up and down, from the Devil’s Staircase at 1,800 feet (550 meters) to sea level, and then it made you walk by an expressway. In six days and nights, there weren’t many places to sleep so people brought tents and just slept wherever they were on the path.

The travelers could do this because of the Freedom to Roam laws in England, Wales and Scotland. Scotland’s law made sure that land was for public use and that people had the right to travel wherever they might be going. It was brought about in defiance of the English, whom wanted to tax the travels of the Scots. As long as travelers didn’t do disruptive activities, they were allowed to go where they wanted.

This allowed me to walk on this path in Quiraring and complain about it every minute. This also allowed me to walk into people’s backyards, which I had done before. Back at Dalkeith Palace, a palace outside of Edinburgh, I had gone exploring. Suddenly the trees parted, and I was in someone’s backyard. There wasn’t a fence or a sign to keep me off their property because it wasn’t just their property. It was partially my property too. After realizing I was too close to their house, I backed away and returned to the woods of Dalkeith Palace.

Now I stood on the path of Quiraring, we kept moving on the narrow path. Soon enough, people were moving toward us with their right to be on free property. The government didn’t own this land. The people didn’t own this land. We were meant to treat the land with the same respect that we treat anything. With a view like this, all respect was well deserved. Unsure if the travelers spoke our language, it was just my small group of friends on one side, the side that went up, while we let the other travelers face death by walking near the edge. If one of us had to go, I preferred if it was them.

Though we were all entitled to the land under the Land Reform Act of 2003, but under the old Scots law of Scottish blood over anything else, I chose to live over my fellow travelers. Without the Land Reform Act that gave everyone that Freedom to Roam, the Highlands would be broken up and destroyed by buildings and houses. This land belong to this farmer and that land to that farmer, and a large fence between them would break their animals up. Trees would be torn down to create smooth hills so that when winter came and everything was white, people would slide down. There would be more than two roads to Quiraring, and they would always be packed with cars that filled the atmosphere with toxic gas. All resources would be removed or ruined. The natural picturesque land would be replaced by signs saying *Braveheart* was filmed here. The Land Reform Act protected the land and the people who wanted to see it for its true and pure beauty.

Once my friends thought the fellow travelers were far enough away, they continued on the journey. I wasn’t so quick to move from my safe place against the hill. Though they called

for me, I remained, looking down, which our tour guide told us not to do. Chloe called for me again, and I trembled as I took a step away from safety.

"I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you," I mumbled.

"Isn't the view worth it?" another girl asked.

"Your death is worth it," I threatened. The girl laughed because she thought I was kidding, but there was a cliff. I could've made it look like an accident.

We kept moving. Since we had gone over the peak, now it was time for the walk down, which was considerably easier, except when rain started to pour on us. The ground grew soft. Mud turned into slush. Water puddles became small ponds. The chill came in through by a thick wind. I was drenched within a second. Blue sky spread around us. Only the one cloud blossomed over us as we continued on our hike. The blue ocean got closer and closer.

At some point on this path, we crossed some farming land, which was marked by the sheep with wool dyed red and blue. Farming land was protected by the Land Reform Act of 2003, when a case was brought against two travelers passing through a farm. The travelers went against an unwritten code of respecting land and nature, but as well as law that states farm animals are owned by people. However with the death of some animals, a lawsuit was brought up against the act. The act stayed in place but now protected farmers more. The land we walked through on the cliffs, the sheep climbed better and disappeared out of sight.

Others fought against the land reform act, stating that some of the land had been theirs for generations, claiming the government stole it. The government said it was returning it to the people. The land had been owned since feudalism days, but now it belonged back to the clans and the travelers. It belonged to the people who loved it the most. On the free land of the Highlands, no more buildings are allowed to go up. There isn't hunting or fishing. The grass isn't cut. The trees aren't torn down. The Scottish land reform is meant for the community, so everyone and everything may flourish.

In the United States, where I come from, we have national parks, but nothing like this. I devised that it is a cultural difference. Most Americans just don't care. The conservation acts put in place by the Scottish government protects the Highlands, all of it, from the lowlands of the Highlands to the tippy-top. Punishments were carried out for damage done through imprisonment to fines. It was a serious subject to hurt the Scottish Highlands. I didn't really understand why anyone would want to do that.

The pouring rain had cleared off. It was a nice Scottish rain, just pouring straight down, unlike the terrible Scottish rain that came in sideways. Everything was now pure water. I felt mud in my rain boots, which gave me another thing to complain about.

"Can't you just be happy?" the girl asked annoyed.

"Can't you just be dead already?" I responded. Chloe snickered behind me. The ocean neared. "We're almost to the end. You can make a run for it."

The girl smiled like it was joke. When I didn't return the smile, she raced ahead to see the end.

I was happy, though I didn't want to admit it. My feet hurt. My back hurt. I was hungry and tired. I felt accomplished with every step I took. It was another thing to say that I did. If I didn't do this, I would've regretted for the rest of my life. But I said none of this aloud, because that girl annoyed me every step of the way. She wasn't allowed to be right.

As we traveled like so many others, I found myself getting into a regular pattern. Another step forward. My eyes no longer wandered off a side of a cliff, but I stared forward to the goal. The water gleamed in the sunlight, and perhaps I would get the chance to lie on the shore anyway. I didn't come to Scotland for the ocean, but now I welcomed every moment of it. I never admitted it out loud, but I came to Scotland for this.

I came to Scotland so that I had the freedom to roam. I hated hikes, and I loved to complain about them. The view was worth it, and I was happy. At the peak, I saw the world spread out in front of me. The land traveled on and on. The green grass swallowed everything in its path, only to be stopped by the cooling sea. The waves morphed together, blue and green. The tan rocks reminded me of the desert, the only thing left dry. I came to Scotland for the rain, cold and wind, so that I would feel like a storm waiting to happen. I came to Scotland so that I would travel over the Highlands as the storm. I may make everything grow and flourish. I would flourish.

The hike meant more to me than a path to follow that was dangerous. I was alive out here. I moved with the clouds, wind and grass. I was a part of them. I understand why the Freedom to Roam is necessary. There aren't many places like the Highlands in the world, and sometimes you need to be free. Sometimes you need let it all go, and let it fly away in the wind. It all flew away in the wind, like my words did when the storm came through. Cold and wet, I let the worries drip away like snow thawing off the top of the mountain.

I thought when I came on this hike I wouldn't be able to do it. I hated the height. I hated the person I happened to be threatening and didn't actually kill. Being outside was not my idea of fun. But I realized this was where I belonged. I belonged to the sky, the wind, the mountains and the path. I belonged to the Highlands.