

Emily Dickinson: “It was not death, for I stood up,”

Music and adolescent angst in the (18)80s.

BY ROBIN EKISS

Like hair, power ballads were big in my day (the ‘80s), and [Emily Dickinson](#)’s were a lot more memorable than Mötley Crüe’s. We thumbed our noses at our English teachers by singing “I heard a fly buzz when I died” to the tune of “Gilligan’s Island,” repeating “between the heavens of storm” in place of “a three-hour tour.” This trick works because Dickinson adopted her meter largely from hymns and ballads—the pop songs of her time—with their simple stressed lines and repeating rhymes.

As a child, Dickinson may have sung hymns at the church she regularly attended, but her relationship to organized religion soon became conflicted. She dropped out of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before the end of her first year. “Instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,” Dickinson wrote, “Our little Sexton – sings.” Her nonconformist poetic stance appealed to the fledgling goth-girl in me: somewhat shy, slyly irreverent, introspective, and imaginatively dark. Like many teenagers testing their new-wave wings, I had Cyndi Lauper in one ear, singing “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,” and Dickinson in the other, insisting that *Girls Just Wanna Think about Their Mortality . . . and Immortality*.

With its brooding, melancholic language and surreal images, the Dickinson poem that spoke most directly to my adolescent angst was “[It was not Death, for I stood up](#)”:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down –
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos – crawl –
Nor Fire – for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool –

Those bells, “put[ting] out their Tongues,” give the afternoon the Bronx cheer. Dickinson defines her despair by telling us not what it is, but what it’s *not* (“It was not Death”). The more forcefully she negates her metaphors (“It was not Night,” “It was not Frost”), the more dire her feelings become. It wasn’t death, she insists, but it sure feels like it. Punished by “Siroccos” (those unrelenting hot Saharan winds), she’s as cool and aloof as

marble statuary. When these comparisons fail to convey just how bad the situation is, she resorts to similes that are even more drastic:

And yet, it tasted, like them all,

The Figures I have seen

Set orderly, for Burial,

Reminded me, of mine –

As if my life were shaven,

And fitted to a frame,

And could not breathe without a key,

And 'twas like Midnight, some –

Stripped to the bone (“as if my life were shaven / And fitted to a frame”), she suffers the rigor mortis of a body awaiting burial. Words fail, becoming unmoored from their sentence:

When everything that ticked – has stopped –

And Space stares all around –

Or Grisly frosts – first Autumn morns,

Repeal the Beating Ground –

But, most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool –

Without a Chance, or Spar –

Or even a Report of Land –

To Justify – Despair.

The “Figures” (such as chaos itself) remain frozen (“Stopless – cool –”), just as the world and space stop around them. Like an explorer lost for months at sea, Dickinson is awash in abstraction, without the grounding that “even a Report of Land” must bring. Her ideas are fractured, incomplete, interrupted by those dashes. Each one is a semaphore, its signal flag raised mid-thought, as if to say *I am abandoning my vessel*.

Punctuation, usually so helpful in making the meaning clear, isn’t here. Instead, the silence that takes its place is meant to warn and make us wary, to pause and parry, so that we lurch and linger—and turn back to the emphatic import of every capitalized noun. When we listen, it’s hard not to hear the multiple meanings in a

phrase like “first Autumn morns,” whose implication of mourning isn’t lost on the ear. And it’s impossible not to hear the insistent rhythm and rhyme of the ballad, as if Dickinson were tapping her toes under every deliberate line.

If hymn meter (lines of eight syllables alternating with lines of six) was Dickinson’s metronome, ballad meter (4/3/4/3)—what she’s using here—was her “double time.” We can hear in that quickened and hypnotic pace—and in those *short, sharp, shocked* syllables (“Flesh,” “crawl,” “feet,” “cool”) the urgency of her message. As logic and syntax break down, the relentless, marching rhythm of the ballad’s sound-sense steps in to drive us onward.

It’s here that Dickinson’s poem stages a “battle of the bands,” as secular and spiritual music duel it out. If despair was a song, wouldn’t it sound like this: clipped, repetitive, taut—as imperative as church music, as regular as a ballad’s refrain? In the face of internal—and *eternal*—questions about loneliness and self-loathing, Dickinson’s poem is a rebellious music that laments those particular states of adolescence we never quite outgrow.

SOURCE: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/180040>