

Y O U ' V E   S E E N   B A L L O O N S  
S E T ,   H A V E N ' T   Y O U ?

O N   T H R E E   O F   D I C K I N S O N ' S   P O E M S   O F   D E A T H



F R A N C I S C O   U N G E R

Dickinson's poems of death bring together two of her most disparate personae: the child naively confronting the mysteries of experience, and the skeptical, sardonic, and rather recalcitrant speaker whose sense of conscience and sophisticated wit lead her to chafe against the creeds, consolations, and shibboleths of a parochial culture and its prayer book to which she can often only bristlingly – or as she herself would put it somewhat more lightly, “stealthily” – belong (insisting parsimoniously on our “gross eyes,” and exclaiming that heaven is “what I cannot reach!”). On one hand, death itself – its mystery, its possible sea-change, its suddenness – alarms and obsesses Dickinson. At times it can even seem that death, and the power to kill, represent, in perverse form, something of an analogue for the form of poetic power Dickinson craves: a poetry of incredible force and volatility, a poetry of sudden shock, translated into a syntax that bursts and explodes onto the page, in which lines can seem calculated to jar and unease; this is the Dickinson who can find such exploitable intensity in a cat mashing a mouse, in an imperial thunderbolt scalping a “naked soul,” in a loaded gun presented as a figure for poetic ease and culmination to rival Keats's blossoming leaves or ripening grain,

the Dickinson who was enamored of volcanoes, and who spoke of a great book's taking one's head off, and that as the highest plaudit.

Simultaneously, on the other hand, those structures of belief that would disarm death or render it anodyne, even welcome, attract Dickinson's ire. So her poems of death often showcase Dickinson at once at her most genuinely astonished and finely arch, as she struggles to come to terms with death's mystery – forever the child asking what has become of the disappeared, or gazing into the face of the dying while trying painfully to register the weight and the import of a last look – while all the while ironizing and parodying those structures of belief that would deprive death of its power, its horror, its alarm. In the efforts of Dickinson's speakers to meditate on death, we find a subtle mixture of naive wonder and sardonic flippancy. Death, we might say, brings together Dickinson the poet of innocence and Dickinson the poet of experience. It confronts the poet, on the level of sense and immediate experience, with an always replenished and urgent mystery, while also engaging, by virtue of the way it summons palliative and interpretive social rituals and beliefs, her more critical and ironizing sensibilities.

•

You've seen Balloons set – Haven't You?

So stately they ascend –

It is as Swans – discarded You,

For Duties Diamond –

Their Liquid Feet go softly out

Opon a Sea of Blonde –

They spurn the Air, as 'twere too mean

For Creatures so renowned –

Their Ribbons just beyond the eye –

They struggle – some – for Breath –

And yet the Crowd applaud, below –

They would not encore – Death –

The Gilded Creature strains – and spins –

Trips frantic in a Tree –

Tears open her imperial Veins –

And tumbles in the Sea –

The Crowd – retire with an Oath –  
 The Dust in Streets – go down –  
 And clerks in Counting Rooms  
 Observe – “’Twas only a Balloon” –

The question on which #730 opens hardly readies us for the horrifying imagery that is to follow – that of balloons, emblems for whatever in us is great-souled and rarified and precious, torn apart on the branches of the high trees. The question is banal in its invitingness, appealing both to a common experience and to a feeling of mutuality with the speaker. If anything, the line sets up a sort of misdirection or feint, for we might assume the release of balloons will be marshaled as a familiar trope: of quotidian levity, of imaginative release, the momentary transformation of a sea of spectators into amused wonderers bound in a state of common and fleeting reverie. (A. R. Ammons, for instance, has a wonderful poem in *A Coast of Trees* that uses the ascent of balloons to figure his own gusto, his visionary excitement and imaginative gravitation upward, “I have let all my balloons alose . . .”) Yet if we are being lulled here, it is possible, upon returning to the poem’s opening in light of the full poem, to find a certain aggression in the questioner – *Haven’t You?* reread in light of the sort of complicity or indifference the poem will adumbrate, almost prosecutorial, charging us with indifference to the fates of these “gilded creatures” who will come to such brutal ends. The repetition of “You” in the poem’s third line insists aggressively on our place in the poem’s scene, a place, a responsibility, we are still not equipped to understand.

The poem’s second line moves us efficiently from the speaker’s questioning to a more elevated and aesthetically minded register: the turn is one from colloquial speech to the slightly more deliberate and even lavish language of aesthetic appreciation. “So stately they ascend – / It is as Swans,” so rich in alliteration and assonance, makes audible to us the speaker’s relish, her easy sense of beauty: indeed, to watch “stately” transform into “ascend” is to behold something of the delightful taking flight the speaker bears witness to, the fast movement from trochee to iamb almost mimetic of a springing forward and upward. Meanwhile, the three hard *d*’s which conclude the stanza give us, perhaps, a misleading

sense of these balloons-cum-swans as formidable and resilient creatures; if Dickinson's *s*'s might stress their lightness and gracefulness, her *d*'s ("discarded . . . Duties Diamond") give us a sense of rigor and weight. The sudden metamorphosis by which our balloons have become, or become like, swans helps to move us somewhat more briskly into the realm of rarer experience, of the aesthetically marvelous. To see the shapes of swans in a school of balloons is to straddle the line between the genuinely conceivable and the fully fantastical. It is an act of imagination, then, that seems to insist on seeing attentively, and not simply on a chimerical license.

The subsequent stanzas compel us to observe the balloons/swans as they make their graceful, then frantic, then mutilated flight. "Sea of Blonde," like "Duties Diamond," surprises us with its unexpected and aesthetically marvelous combination, while "Blonde" picks up unexpectedly on "ascend," as well as "Diamond," sustaining a rich texture of rhyme in the poem that contributes to our still unruptured sense of aesthetic ease and grace. In their "spurn[ing]" of the air (outdoing even Shelley's Skylark, that "scorner of the ground"), the creatures suggest a certain aristocratic vainglory. Yet Dickinson's emphasis seems not to be on their hubris so much as on their delicacy, their "Liquid Feet" that "go softly out" – just how light, how vulnerable, how precious, in the slightly patronizing yet here largely adulating sense, they are.

It is only in the third stanza that the poem finally discloses its true subject and dramatic motive, lending the subversive potency to its – by this point, it is obvious, reticent – opening question. For the swans, we now gather, are involved in a terrible struggle for life, a struggle that will end direly, and the applauding crowd below now appears, in the strange double vision the speaker bestows on us, as heedless spectators at a scene of horror and not merely as participants in a moment of idle reverie. "They would not encore – Death – ," read at its most acerbically ironic and accusatory, can seem to rhetorically insist on just what it flatly resists: that is to say, if these people can be witness to the mangling of such delicate and beautiful creatures, these balloons that we may take as stand-ins at once for something like the Platonic ascent of the soul, and so of nobler natures, and also, simply, for the struggle of refined and delicate natures thwarted not only by

death but by ordinary dangers, humiliations, undoings, then in a sense Dickinson's speaker is naming a callousness, or at the least an unwittingness, that merits her ire.

It is possible to think of these swans as proverbial pearls before swine, and also as finer natures passing through the vale of soul-making. Perhaps the crowd can simply no longer see the swans, as they have passed out of view. But the progress of the poem, ending with the crowd's perfunctory withdrawal from the scene (retiring with an "Oath" that shifts us onto a scene as if of guilt, punishment, and public legal ceremony – are we to imagine here that the fate of the swans was somehow, intolerably, ordained? Or that the spectators have formally, bloodlessly, asserted their innocence in the transaction?) and the clerks' shrugging dictum that almost issues as a justification ("'Twas only a Balloon"), and a justification that sounds so inadequately against the speaker's admiring sense of the creatures' grandeur as well as their pitiable vulnerability, seems to insist on a sort of black comedy of human indifference verging on active malice. These finer natures have been released into the air only to be destroyed under the observant, yet not quite discerning, eyes of a crowd that makes little of their demise.

The poem's end, "'Twas only a balloon"- this wonderfully brusque refrain of the realist at a scene, rather, of rich fable, missing the plot altogether – seems to demand, again, a reflexive counter-reading (that it was *not* only a balloon, was *anything but* a balloon: power of imagination is linked here both to lucidity, to see what has so dramatically unfolded, and to a power of active sympathy, to manifest a care for the mutilated swans undiluted, or distracted, by received theological assurances and scripts). One notices that this last line offers the first recurrence of the word "balloon" – it is as though the poem's *ostensible* subject is being loudly announced in its opening and closing lines the better to insist on how divergent its implicit subject is in the lines in between. "You've seen . . . Haven't You" and "'Twas only" insist on a logic of the matter-of-fact and the familiar whereas the poem's dramatic unfolding has asked us to engage in the spirited ascent, and unraveling, of a metaphor: balloons that become swans, which come to stand in turn for a "Gilded Creature" of grace and refinement and a terrible fragility, and also as an emblem for our mortality. When the crowd retires, Dickinson writes, "The Dust in

Streets – go down –,” a line that may possibly mean nothing more than that the individuals walk back down the streets toward their affairs, yet unites them with the image of their own deaths (dust), their own going down, as though we had come to see them in the light of the very thing, death, to which they had proved so thoroughly impercipient or dulled.

Those who have watched the spectacle attentively will have found in the mutilation of the swans a horrifying image of violent death: in the heightened verbal energy unleashed across “strains” and “spins” and “Trips frantic”; and in how effortlessly “strains” and “spins,” almost by amalgamation, lead sonically, terrifyingly, inexorably, to “Veins”; and with what relentless alliteration Dickinson has woven this stanza of climactic action (“Trips,” “Tree,” “Tears,” “tumbles”); how swiftly assonance whisks us from “*Gilded*” to “*frantic*” to “*imperial*” to “*tumbles*” – the language here is frenzied, maintaining its metrical regularity while still heightening its propulsive energies. “Tears open her imperial Veins,” in a poem predicated on the poet’s powers of surprise, seems yet another coup – who else would have thought to confer upon a set of ascending balloons *veins* to be torn violently open, a terrifying anthropomorphizing as brutal as something drawn from Tacitus, the most wretched end imaginable, calling on our greatest possible powers of imagination of the sheer sensation of extreme pain, a pain that segues with an almost baffling grace or lightness in the subsequent line, “And tumbles in the Sea.”

To chart the extraordinary progress from the nonchalance of the poem’s opening line to the atrociousness of its penultimate stanza is to take stock of both Dickinson’s desire and her extraordinary ability to access, as it were, the horrendous, the barely endurable, from anywhere, from the most quotidian and inoffensive of overtures. As I have suggested, we may think on the basis of the poem’s opening line that we are being prepared for divertimento. What follows, instead, may suggest just what barbarism Dickinson finds irrevocably at the heart of her subject. “They would not encore – Death”: the line might be reread, finally, as having something of that signature scorn and mockery with which Dickinson occasionally confronts the schemes of theological consolation (although it might also be taken to obliquely invoke “Forgive them for they know not what they do” – “They would not encore,” in

this construction, followed by an implicit “if only they knew, grasped death truly”). The witless applause of those surveying the ascent carries on as the gilded creatures are horribly torn to bits, veins opened, the blood of life gone, tumbling back into the “Sea” of the sky – into pure oblivion. (And even in this surprising conflation of sea and sky the reader is rather jolted in imagining not so much an unimpeded ascent heavenward as a terrible, breathless, drowning.)

The poem’s framing is disquieting. Had it been written by Sylvia Plath, we might think of it as the ironic record of a speaker’s psychotic, yet probing, imaginings, finding in a release of balloons an awful and distorted vision, a piece of inspired and volatile derangement. It is possible to read the poem as the profession of a speaker who is somewhat unhinged, whose powers of aesthetic appreciation swerve so violently into an imagination of brutal violence that we intuit something downright pathological in the patterns of her mind, and all filtered through a brand of subversive irony that can seem almost difficult to endure, to imagine a speaker enduring with any equipoise. (If you can see the tearing of veins in a balloon sailing up toward the trees, this world may be a hard one, psychically, to travel through. And, surely, a part of the poem’s incredible charge derives from the apparent gratuitousness of its violence, from the willful force inherent in the association it contrives.)

Dickinson might be taken to have written this poem almost for the sole delight of ambushing the reader. But the trap she springs, the expectations she so gleefully flouts, may be taken to represent something of her general approach toward death: an animating desire to reveal an entity in all of its intrinsic brutality (exacerbated by the hollow, ritual observances of impercipient or unfeeling spectators) such that no theological scheme would ever induce any sane person to “encore”: to justify or to placidly accept its occurrence, and to eagerly await his or her own ascent in turn. (In “encore,” we may think in the first instance of the celebration of a congregation upon the putative ascent of some poor soul, the “encore” also, if perhaps for this poet inadvertently, punning on the life to come.) It is a poem not only as aesthetic marvel but as polemic, and as parochial black comedy, a poem whose opening and closing lines round out a masterpiece of the grimmest kind of

archness, a complaint against sham consolation produced by a skeptical aesthete far too terrified by the specter of brutal death to stand for its facile subordination to perfunctory assurances, but only too ready to reassure us in turn – in a wonderful aping of just the sort of palliation she is so vigorously protesting – not to worry, for it is only, after all, a matter of balloons.

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Glee – The great storm is over –  
 Four – have recovered the Land –  
 Forty – gone down together –  
 Into the boiling Sand –

Ring – for the Scant Salvation –  
 Toll – for the bonnie Souls –  
 Neighbor – and friend – and Bridegroom –  
 Spinning upon the Shoals –

How they will tell the story –  
 When Winter shake the Door –  
 Till the Children urge –  
 But the Forty –  
 Did they – Come back no more?

Then a silence – suffuse the story –  
 And a softness – the Teller's eye –  
 And the children – no further question –  
 And only the Sea – reply –

Dickinson's #685, a shipwreck poem, opens on a tone of rapturous celebration ("Glee – The great storm is over –") that is just as soon introduced as it is undermined. The poem's early imperatives ("Ring," "Toll") call for the tolling of bells to announce the providential salvation of the souls lost at sea, and we hear the speaker's first line – full-throated, a sort of bellowing, almost that of a town-crier – as continuous with the ringing of the bells. But we quickly gather that this is lyrical speech as sardonic mimicry, mocking the mood, and the underlying belief system, exposed here in all of its impossible incoherence and inscrutability – Are we to weigh four against forty? Are we to celebrate the lives saved from worldly suffering or those saved from horrific death? or both alike? – to

which it gives such booming expression. It is by foisting on us a sort of farcically exaggerated schizophrenia – torn between the four and the forty, between two different varieties of salvation, between worldly and otherworldly hopes and despairs – that the poem raises its protest or ridicule. The last three lines of the opening stanza make mincemeat of the poem's salvific exuberance: "Four – have recovered the Land – / Forty – gone down together – / Into the boiling Sand – ." Arithmetic here says all that needs to be said, and with what terrible swiftness "Forty" leaps out of "Four," as though by parodic continuation, practically spilling out. (One might think of a bit of sly satire on the scriptural thought that "the very hairs on your head are numbered." Here the perversity of the numbers in question means to put us in mind of the terrible, blundering captainship of providence.)

The second line is not so much qualified by the third as eclipsed by it, as though "forty," by extending on "four," devoured it, a progression supplanting its predecessor in terms of its compelling power. And in "boiling Sand" Dickinson's speaker surprises us with imagery more infernal than maritime, with the striking "boiling" bringing to a boil all of the strong and soft o's that permeate the stanza ("storm," "over," "Four," "recovered," "Forty," "gone down together," "Into") while the hard rhyme of "Land" and "Sand" ties together the stanza with a sing-song air that seems designed to infantilize the "Glee" to which it gives mocking voice. When "Ring –" opens the second stanza, it seems formally to parallel the first stanza's "Glee –," and in doing so to retrospectively clothe "Glee –" with the parallel status of an imperative: that is, Glee here is being insisted on, according, as it were, to a script, and carries a trace of coercion rather than being the record of the speaker's genuine feeling. Speech-act is being divorced from self-ironizing speaker. A form of ritual celebration is being lampooned, we could say, from within; it is being mocked at by being given the loudest possible affirmation, on cue and by rote.

"Scant," set before "Salvation," might just be one of the most astonishingly deflationary adjectives in Dickinson's poetry and "Ring – for the Scant Salvation" is a gem of ludicrous satire. "Scant" picks up on some of the still simmering energy of "Sand," and it is so abrupt, so exacting and pinched in its sound, that it almost brings us to a stop before we reach "Salvation." It is a word

that makes a credible rendition of the line as something other than pure farce difficult to conceive of, written as it is against the grain of the line, of its spirit of breathless exaltation, and yet it coheres with a belief system that would have found in the ascent of forty souls cause for ecstatic celebration and worship, and so its lyrical tenuousness here is precisely to the poet's purpose. "Spinning upon the Shoals" can seem hyperbolically farcical in its own right – easy enough to imagine leaves, or atoms, "spinning," but neighbor and friend and bridegroom? The conversion of "Souls" into "Shoals" deepens our sense of the risible, rhyme here doing the work not so much of elegant patterning as of tactless correspondence. The rhyming of "Souls" with "Shoals" can seem to have the effect of the poetic equivalent of a sullyng or tarnishing, these souls so belittled, so overmatched, set "spinning" like a child's top by the forces of nature.

The third stanza finally breaks the poem's pattern of zealous imperatives and contemporaneous narration enacted in metrically regular quatrains. We find instead a strikingly unwieldy, or halting, stanza of five lines, with, as it were, a broken fourth line where the children raise their somber and here, in effect, unanswerable question: What became of those who drowned? The speaker now looks forward, and imagines a "they" that we might take simply to indicate a future generation yet that also might indicate the speaker's avowed and preemptive self-distancing from those who will try to gloss over the terrible story of the fatalities. "Story" insofar as it picks up alliteratively on "great *storm*" seems only to stress the storm's awful power, its inescapability. Similarly, the "shake" in "When Winter shake the Door" binds winter to the "Shoals" as yet another incarnation of nature's atrocious power. The breaking in two of the fourth line, its disappearance after the caesura before the stanza's fifth line carries on the children's question, has the effect, as it were, of grinding the poem, and the reader, to a halt. This is not a matter of lingering in a perplexity since we grasp the question's shape before a word has been uttered, but rather of establishing a powerful emphasis and a cultivation of silence so starkly at odds with the impetuous enthusiasms with which the poem opened.

It is in this silence that the poem acquires its special poignancy, shifting in spirit from a satire, a sort of mock-elegy, into a poem

that admits of more pathos. The children serve Dickinson's purpose here as representatives of a terrified wonder and bafflement, of an intuitive fear that cannot yet quite accept what it worst suspects, yet also as figures who, because they have not yet been indoctrinated, cannot yet play doctrinaire in the face of grievous human suffering and misfortune. The "urge" of the children has little in keeping with the frenetic imperatives that guided the first two stanzas. They allow Dickinson to transform the energies of the poem into a mood of haunted questioning. And this stark pivoting, in turn, allows Dickinson to produce a final stanza that, while returned to a rhyming and metrically regular quatrain, nevertheless has little in keeping with the rambunctious energies of the opening two stanzas. Its alliterative *s*'s texture lines that almost ask to be whispered, so weighted they are with a brooding and muted intensity. Alliteration here, we might say, almost does the work of bringing out the very voice of the "Sea" that is named as the "only . . . reply" to the children's unanswerable inquiry.

These *s*'s, deployed so prodigally here, make us hear the "softness," the "silence," the somberness of the sea that answers only by asserting again and again its own power, not so much menacing here as rhythmic, constant, unassailable, a sort of theme of nature that has overtaken whatever proud bells and exaltations on which the poem might have commenced. The "silence" that so wonderfully suffuses the "Teller's eye" almost seems to confer evidence of a wisdom – evidence, that is, of an afflicted humility, a Teller whose greatest act is that of self-effacement, and who in withholding speech somehow allays the children's very questioning, allowing them to come, unobstructed, by their own powers of apprehension, to the truth of things. In this image of the finally reticent or taciturn Teller who makes way for the audible sea's "reply," which has already worked its way alliteratively into the texture of the last stanza, Dickinson leaves us with a poignant image of rhetorical parsimony. While it is possible to read the Teller's sudden silence as a simple matter of perplexity at what to say, at how to parry the children's concerns, it seems more likely – in the decided meaningfulness of the "softness" that overtakes the story and the "silence" that the Teller in a sense communicates, makes palpable by the way he looks (we are to imagine a silence not only endured but expressed) – that Dickinson is suggesting a scene at which some-

thing is taught, is transmitted, in which something of the terrible pathos of death is introduced to these children for the first time and at least in part by the Teller's subtle guiding, by his refusal to either dissemble or to obstruct the sea's "reply." In this way, the poem leads us to imagine, the fact of death might be encountered by children querying an elder, an authority, who eventually draws up short, and whose humbling, itself so pregnant with meaning and pathos, directs them for the first time to the answer they sought, which only required a subtle change in attunement to a reply that was already around them. It is a sort of coming-of-age story. To hear the sea here is to come into knowledge of death, of the death of those in common lore and of one's own. It is a knowledge that strangely allays one's questions ("no further question") without resolving them. One has only the sea's reply, and, perhaps, one's understanding of how the Teller has grown abashed, left now to the softest of silences, as though the specter of death were to strip human tellers not only of "Glee" and the ringing of bells but also of any too insistent eloquence. It is human silence, after it all, that lets in the sound of the sea.

If #730 subverts the reader's expectations by following an innocuous overture with a scene of horrifying imagery in the service of bringing out the terrible and in a sense inassimilable grotesqueness of death (inassimilable, that is, to any consolatory belief-system or relatively well-adjusted individual disposition), #685 similarly thwarts or manipulates the reader's expectations. In this instance, however, we might think of the transformation Dickinson enacts as a powerful swerve away from one sonic register toward another: away from the somewhat bombastic, lilting, and hyperbolic diction of the poem's opening stanzas through the strained and halting passage of the third stanza (when the imperatives of the parodist give way to the question urged by the Children) and finally toward the beautifully austere and softly cadenced final stanza, with its many *s*'s generating a sonic texture worthy of the sea, worthy of answering satire and hyperbole with an understated pathos. The poetry here aspires to the eloquence of venturing almost nothing – of catching with great delicacy the "only . . . reply," as the children fall silent with the silenced Teller, coming to a knowledge that needs no words, no propositions, no questions, no consolations, but only these sounds, soft and suffus-

ing, as they brood on death without answers, perhaps without desiring any more answers hearing, at last, "only the Sea."

•

Of Death I try to think like this –  
 The Well in which they lay us  
 Is but the Likeness of the Brook  
 That menaced not to slay us,  
 But to invite by that Dismay  
 Which is the Zest of sweetness  
 To the same Flower Hesperian,  
 Decoying but to greet us –

I do remember when a Child  
 With bolder Playmates straying  
 To where a Brook that seemed a Sea  
 Withheld us by its roaring  
 From just a Purple Flower beyond  
 Until constrained to clutch it  
 If Doom itself were the result,  
 The boldest leaped, and clutched it –

If #730 attempts to wrestle with the specter of death through the unfolding of an extravagant metaphor (its balloons-cum-swans enacting the horrifically thwarted ascent of the soul in a sort of disenchanting fable militating against metaphysical consolation, whether Platonic, Christian, or otherwise), and if #685 attempts to approach the specter of death through a narrative that begins, in terms of its prevailing register of speech, in sardonic farce yet ends with the deep pathos of an abashed Teller, earnestly inquisitive children, and the humbling, disquieting, incantatory sound of the sea, Dickinson's #1588 attempts to approach death rather, as its opening line informs us, through an act of speculative thought ("Of Death I try to think like this").

Yet its mode of thought is not quite reducible to formal argument. Rather, the speaker attempts to reason through a vision of death that, unlike the previous two poems, appears to err on the side of hope and wishfulness: hope that death might involve, in the end, the longed-for sea-change, the transformation, by an elated and daring leap, of the mortal into the realm of immor-

tality. Indeed, the speaker's attempt at broaching death through an act of thought seems to gesture toward a form of thinking that is not so much a matter of analytical reasoning or, say, of rigorous dialectics as it is a matter of a bold imagination, tied to – and as if substantiated by – something of a hallowed childhood memory, and marshaled in a spirit of longing. The transition from the first eight-line stanza to the second charts something of a shift from purer thinking – the drawing of distinctions, analogies, and qualifications – to the dramatization of a remembered scene of pastoral daring. Yet memory here is not so much departing from thought or compensating for its insufficiencies as it is, in a sense, providing the warrant for the hopeful turn of the mind the speaker thinks through. Thus we might take Dickinson's speaker to be manifesting a hopeful orientation toward death that only arises to a way of thinking insofar as that way of thinking issues first out of rich private experience, out of a lasting image, preserved, heightened, and celebrated in memory.

The sort of thinking Dickinson's speaker musters yearningly in the face of the specter of death is one that acquires, for her, its powers of conviction, its rich hold on the imagination not by virtue of any collective belief system or sense of the eternal verities but by virtue of an almost consecrated image drawn out of the poet's past – a moment in which an act of daring, compelled by the irresistible beauty of a "Purple Flower beyond" that nevertheless appeared just in reach, bequeathed to the poet an image of a parlous human leap that might, almost miraculously, be rewarded: the flower of the beyond clutched in the hand by the "boldest" of the children. The poem records a wishful turn of mind that Dickinson might in her more satirical modes repress if not deride. Yet what seems noteworthy, once again, is just how idiosyncratic Dickinson's speaker is in her effort to lend credence to her attempt at thinking through death in a hopeful cast of mind, doing so by making recourse primarily, if not exclusively, to a hallowed and cheering memory of her own, relying not on any received creed, text, authority, or belief, but on an image proffered her by the children with whom she once played – the image of a flower that beguiled, and of a rare moment in which it seemed that human courage might be requited with a prize greater than anything which it could have been guaranteed or assured, as if the flower,

the beyond, had at once to be seized and munificently given, in a paradox of human daring, earning, as if by will alone, the freely given gift of deliverance, of everlasting life. The idiosyncratic myth animating the poem's thought-process, I mean to suggest, ought to be seen as Dickinson's own, and "Of Death I try to think like this –" ought to be read as announcing an original and idiosyncratic turn of mind.

The poem's opening line announces its speaker's intention to meditate, and, indeed, the poem's first two words ("Of Death"), almost resembling the title of a treatise or analytical essay (one thinks, for instance, of Montaigne – "Of Experience," "Of Cannibals," and so on), work to propose a subject in a way that is out of keeping with so many of Dickinson's poems that initiate their momentum, rather, by some baffling or disorienting interjection. "Of Death I try to think like this –," conversely, places us squarely in the realm, we might say, using a modern phrase, of communicative reason. And yet the speaker is not merely preparing us for an act of attempted persuasion or justification; rather she is trying to give an account, as if to herself, of a way of thinking. She is preparing to try to make plain, perhaps to herself as much as to us, something of her own characteristic pattern of thinking on the subject – requiring a closer investigation of salient metaphor and relevant memory than perhaps she habitually demands of herself. That the thinking should be effortful ("I try") suggests not only that her way of thinking requires a certain extraordinary credulity on her own part but that this will be a mode of thinking whose special intricacy she must somewhat will herself into assuming. The line's assured iambs lend the speaker's venture an appropriate air of deliberativeness and focus, and the "this –" on which it concludes works almost as a sort of mimetic gesture – as a hand gesticulating downward toward the well-weighed argument that is to follow. The way in which the line's iambic structure places emphasis on "try" rather than "I" suggests, moreover, a more universal tilt to the speaker's way of thinking than we might have prepared ourselves for had emphasis fallen more narcissistically, loudly, and eccentrically on the speaker herself. This speaker is not so cocksure. Her style of rumination, rather, is meant to sound poised, graceful, and appealingly trustworthy in its modesty.

The seven lines that follow present the reader with a striking

example of conspicuous distinguishing, qualifying, and logical formalism. Each “but” (three in quick succession) enacts a subtle and scrupulous instance of distinction drawing that lends the speaker’s act of thinking its powerful, and compensatory, intensity. With each “but,” the speaker is refining her argument and implicitly rejecting an alternative explanation or way of representing death. Each “but,” we might say, imports an element of surprise into the unfolding of the argument, introducing at each turn a proposition unexpectedly cheering: that the “Well,” or grave in which one is laid, is only a “Likeness” of a brook whose menacing nature in fact impels us toward the beautiful flower of immortality; that what had seemed at first threatening in fact proves conducive to a “Dismay” that only ends in “sweetness”; and that – this third instance seems slightly more tricky and syntactically elusive – the “Flower” that might have seemed destined to elude us was merely “Decoying,” either evading our grasp when in fact it would end by “greet[ing]” us, or, rather, “Decoying” that it would merely “greet” us when in fact it would be given over to us in full possession.

“Is but,” “not to,” “But to,” “by that,” “Which is,” “To the,” “but to”: this is the language of efficient and lockstep argument, operating through a mixture of definition and distinction. It is a style of language that manages to seem assured without seeming especially arrogant. It is not the thinking of a self-anointed Thinker with a capital T, a style marked by gravitas or ponderous jargon. Rather, it comes off stylistically as the unassuming yet well-weighed thinking of an ordinary person. We find little if anything in the poem’s language of a learned or Latinate register (its primary allusion, “Hesperian,” counting as the lone exception). This is in keeping, once again, with the first line’s emphasis on “try” instead of “I,” and it is in keeping with the stanza’s conspicuous, thrice-repeated line-ending of “us” which insists on the speaker’s meditation of a common predicament or transfiguration in which the self is humbled, is one of many, in the very instance of being granted the flower’s promissory “sweetness.” If the stanza opens with “I try” it ends in “us,” and the speaker’s repeated recourse to “us” suggests both a characteristic self-effacement and a sense of a munificence that is doled out to all alike.

The stanza’s sense of promise is given beautiful texture by the rich and dense alliteration in “Zest of sweetness,” carrying over

into “same Flower Hesperian,” and chiming, again, with both a prior and a succeeding “us.” The sense of grace and even beatitude sounded in these light *s*’s is enriched in part by sonically converting the negative stresses of “menaced” and “slay us,” and also by extending the argument’s pivotal term in the notion of “Likeness.” The rhyming of “Likeness” and “sweetness” indicates precisely the gladness the speaker aims to win through the structure of her argument (wherein apparent burial ought in fact to be understood in likeness, or analogy, to a scene of threat dissolving into something like benediction).

The insistent, and terrible, chain of “lay,” “slay,” and “Dismay” seems to be sonically overturned or outdone by the sheer sweetness, the gleeful extravagance, of “Zest of sweetness” coupled with “Flower Hesperian” (as though a strong chain of assonance, linked to the violent finality of death, were vying against, and ultimately losing out to, a more ethereal alliterative chain linked to a sense of wonderful reprieve and immunity). Hesperian is not only so rich with *s*’s that seem aligned with the thought of salvation and of blessing, it also stands, as the stanza’s only four-syllable word, as its own conspicuous “Flower” or prize (the magnitude of its sound augmented, moreover, by a dash of the exotic, of the classical, and of the grandly literary, standing out from the rest of the stanza with a special pride). It is the word to which the speaker’s argument lovingly builds, and in which it finds imaginative culmination. It is a word, moreover, that finds special resonance in a stanza in which the speaker has imaginatively construed the grave not as, say, a mere pit, or opening in the ground, or little room but as a “Well”: this flower is the crowning image, this is to say, in an imaginative landscape characterized by imagery that is elemental, where the human grave is construed as a small body of water, where the highest thought of salvation is manifested in the form of a beguiling flower.

The poem’s second stanza shifts us suddenly, but smoothly, from the realm of reasoned argument to that of dramatic recollection, to the memory of an episode of childhood daring that returns spontaneously to the speaker as a sort of corroboration of her argument – for experience has suggested to her either the template for or else an instantiation of her way of thinking of death, and she has found in a childhood memory the locus for envision-

ing the menacing brook, the promissory flower, and the sense of inspired likeness or seeming that now comprise her vision of an accessible immortality. “I do,” with its strong affirmation and active momentum, announces our turn from the realm of meditation to that of dynamic and virile action. The strong *d*’s in the stanza’s opening two lines (“do,” “Child,” “bolder”), to be picked up at the stanza’s close in the swaggering play on and away from a possible “Doom” of the “boldest,” give the reader a sense of childhood bravado and fearlessness – of the *vita activa* in lieu of the *vita contemplativa*. “Brook” and “Flower” establish a setting that operates as a doubling of the first stanza’s, as the primary contextual terms are carried over and replicated.

In this second stanza, “seemed,” evocative of “Likeness,” suggests a different directionality, as it were, of likeness altogether: whereas for the adult it is the apprehension of a potentially elusive likeness that makes the truth of death perceptible, for the child it is the naive susceptibility to a threatening likeness (that by which a mere brook seems as threatening as a roaring sea) that lends to a scene its sense of exaggerated danger. By juxtaposing these two forms of likeness, the one that eases and the one that makes uneasy, the one liable to strike the wise adult and the one liable to terrify the impressionable child, Dickinson’s speaker underscores her sense that a mature apprehension of actual metaphysical likeness – that by which the “Well” of the grave is properly understood, as posing no mortal threat at all – brings with it the promise of our salvation. To be properly schooled in the likenesses of the world, it is perhaps suggested, is the mark of the conversion of experience into wisdom, the transformation of what is remembered into what is blissfully intuited. The poem’s progression, we might think, works by a kind of backward descent down the page: the second stanza dramatizes the as yet unreflected-upon primary stuff of innocent experience that will have been refined and transmuted into the rational order with which the first stanza provides us (with its sophisticated, nimble, and highly logical language). In this regard, we might think of the poem as a sort of chronologically backward record of the growth of the poet’s mind. (Indeed, the speaker’s investigation of an ecstatic, climactic, and resonating childhood memory, one that builds toward a sentiment of both serenity and blessedness, and that relies on the weaving together

of personal identity across time – of the speaker in the present, of her childhood self, and of her life to come – has a decidedly Wordsworthian air.) Whereas the second stanza presents us with the wandering of the childhood playmates, the first represents what sense of truth the speaker must have come to after a lifetime of ruminating on and returning to her memories. If from explicit thought we pass into memory, the memory, we suppose, has preceded and ultimately given rise to the thought (where now they exist in a sort of holy unity, as though one stanza were in essence a rewriting of the other, the major terms carried over, the stanza of wisdom merely a re-composition of the stanza of early memory).

At the stanza's halfway point, we find the children "withheld" – held back, but also, we gather, paralyzed by a feeling at once of ravishment and trepidation – as they stare across the Brook's "roaring," its echoing rhyme with "straying" striking us with a palpable sense of volume while also casting back toward the "Dismay" the first stanza had described. "Withheld" gains some of its traction by building on the "With" that opens the stanza's second line. Meanwhile, the gestural "beyond" of the following line operates in a diametrically opposite fashion: it is a word not of poise or paralysis or fixity or traction but of a yearning motion, of an irresistible reaching out toward. "Withheld" and "beyond" produce a dynamic tension – between a feeling of circumscription and that of a contrary impulse toward transcendence or overcoming – that sets the foundation for the stanza's dramatic and rousing close. The "boldest" of the speaker's "bolder Playmates" brings the poem to its fruition by braving "Doom" itself in order to seize the "Purple Flower." Here, "clutched it," the astonishing accomplished deed, answers the mere impulse (styled by the speaker, strangely, almost as a duty to which the brave child is to feel "constrained" or compelled), "to clutch it," so exactly that the reader is left to feel that the transition from impulse to act has an air of the inevitable. ("Constrained," we might also suppose, refers back to the speaker's meditation "Of Death," since the dying person is "constrained," or left with no choice but, to grasp the flower of immortality or else perish once and for all.)

The quick and light alliterative *l*'s of the poem's last line ("boldest," "leaped," "clutched") leave the reader with an impression of dexterous and swift motion, as though the intricate logical

turns of the first stanza were to find their warrant in the most physical and almost impetuous sort of instinctual action, the instantaneous seizure of the Purple Flower brought to life in a language so divergent from the first stanza's language of distinction drawing. This late burst of *l*'s might also cast us back to "Likeness," a word whose thought is so crucial to the poem's hopeful arc. And the *l*'s may be taken to supersede, in this instance, the ominous weight of "Doom," just as "Likeness" had superseded, or recast, the weight of apparent "Death" at the poem's outset. Even in the way in which the heavy *D* of "Doom" is conscripted into the swifter and defter *d*'s of "boldest" and "leaped," we are made to hear a sort of sonic subversion by which the ominous gives way to energized and nimble action.

"Clutched it," the taking of the prize, leaves us in the startled contemplation of an action whose finality, whose air of crescendo, seems to confer on it a feeling of ultimate and incomparable importance: we do not wonder, for example, where the story goes from here or how it is resolved – "clutched it" describes a highest point beyond which the imagination has no will to rise. In this manner, Dickinson's speaker finds in this apt childhood memory a brash triumphal note with which to dramatize the exuberant feeling of "sweetness" with which she has learned, or tried, to "think" of death. The act of clutching the flower – so brazen, so daring, so spontaneous, so childishly innocent in whatever hubris it implies, and so almost miraculously abetted in this telling – invites us to read the speaker's effort of thought as its own parallel attempt to clutch an elusive prize. The boldest child's athletic leap can come to serve, then, as a surprising figure for the speaker's act of thinking (evocative, perhaps, of some mixture of determination, tenuous hope, active intensity, and elated, ravishing perception). She has remembered a form of motion, and an unbending intensity of desire, perfectly suited to the motion, and the desire, of her own elated turn of mind. And so the quasi-treatise of the opening stanza finds in the "straying" and swaggering children of the second the style of a heroism marked in equal measure by avidity and brashness.

The thought of immortality, of our own blessed transfiguration in the sea-change of death, is redeemed here not as a thought of pitiable wish-fulfillment or spurious self-consolation but rather as

a thought of ecstatic imagination, of the mind's analogue for the child's irresistible enthusiasm and courage. The ravishing flower and its "beyond" acquiesce, in this little fable of hope, to human daring and desire. It is as though Dickinson has allowed herself here to entertain a redress of her own darker thoughts, and of her own more doubting frame of mind. The speaker's thoughts mount toward a state of grace, a grace given without desert (the children have done nothing to earn, or to establish a right to, as it were, this rare flower – they have simply chanced upon it on a day of hallowed wandering), and yet it is a grace won as if by sheer impetuosity – and so we are to think, in parallel terms, of the "Purple Flower beyond," for the meditative speaker almost graspable, almost there to be clutched with a leap of the mind discovering a "Zest of sweetness" so fine, made still finer by the pathos of her fear, that it transports the speaker, in the instant of rumination (elated rumination in which she feels not only bound to the life to come but bound just as delightfully, just as transcendently, to her childhood remembrance as though all of time were being woven at the last together so that the Christian promise is made true and all of time is redeemed), beyond any thought of menace or disillusion, overriding the speaker's potential "Dismay" by a blessed recovery of, and recollection of, the child's genius for a hope that leaps from fear to grandeur, that almost masters "Doom" by dint of its charming irreverence, as though by sheer boldness – by an inspired turn of mind – one could stand to inherit the world, as though by a climactic and courageous attunement of the mind one could capture the "Flower beyond," an intimation of death unmade, and of thought becoming something altogether other than thought, of thought leaping up, with such zest, to clutch at deliverance.