



Emily Dickinson

(1830-1886)

#465 (1862)

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

ANALYSIS

“This poem seems to present two major problems to the interpreter. First, what is the significance of the buzzing fly in relation to the dying person, and second, what is the meaning of the double use of ‘see’ in the last line? An analysis of the context helps to clear up these apparent obscurities, and a close parallel found in another Dickinson poem reinforces such interpretation.

In an atmosphere of outward quiet and inner calm, the dying person collectedly proceeds to bequeath his or her worldly possessions, and while engaged in this activity of ‘willing,’ finds his attention withdrawn by a fly’s buzzing. The fly is introduced to intimate connection with ‘my keepsakes’ and ‘what portion of me be assignable’; it follows—and is the culmination of—the dying person’s preoccupation with cherished material things no longer of use to the departing owner. In the face of death, and even more of a possible spiritual life beyond death, one’s concern with a few earthly belongings is but a triviality, and indeed a distraction from a momentous issue.

The obtrusiveness of the inferior, physical aspects of existence, and the busybody activity associated with them, is poignantly illustrated by the intervening insect (cf. the line 'Buzz the dull flies on the chamber window,' in the poem beginning 'How many times these low feet staggered'). Even so small a...creature is sufficient to separate the dying person from 'the light,' i.e. to blur the vision, to short-circuit mental concentration, so that spiritual awareness is lost. The last line of the poem may then be paraphrased to read: 'Waylaid by irrelevant, tangible, finite objects of little importance, I was not longer capable of that deeper perception which would clearly reveal to me the infinite spiritual reality.' As Emily Dickinson herself expressed it, in another Second Series poem beginning 'Their height in heaven comforts not': 'I'm finite, I can't see.... / This timid life of evidence / Keeps pleading, 'I don't know.'

The dying person does in fact not merely suffer an unwelcome external interruption of an otherwise resolute expectancy, but falls from a higher consciousness, from liberating insight, from faith, into an intensely skeptical mood. The fly's buzz is characterized as 'blue, uncertain, stumbling,' and emphasis on the finite physical reality goes hand in hand with a frustrating lack of absolute assurance. The only portion of a man not properly 'assignable' may be that which dies and decomposes! To the dying person, the buzzing fly would thus become a timely, untimely reminder of man's final, cadaverous condition and putrefaction. The sudden fall of the dying person into the captivity of an ear-heavy skepticism demonstrates of course the inadequacy of the earlier pseudo-stoicism. What seemed then like composure, was after all only a pause 'between the heavens of storm'; the 'firmness' of the second stanza proved to be less than veritable peace of mind and soul; and so we have a profoundly tragic human situation, namely the perennial conflict between two concepts of reality, most carefully delineated."

Gerhard Friedrich
"Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died'"
The Explicator XIII (April 1955) Item 35

"I read Mr. Gerhard Friedrich's explication...of Emily Dickinson's poem with great interest, but I find myself preferring a different explication. Mr. Friedrich says of the fly: 'Even so small a demonstrative, demonstrable creature is sufficient to separate the dying person from 'the light,' i.e. to blur the vision, to short-circuit mental concentration, so that spiritual awareness is lost'... Mr. Friedrich's argument is coherent and respectable, but I feel it tends to make Emily more purely mystical than I sense her to be. I understand that fly to be the last kiss of the world, the last buzz from life.

Certainly Emily's tremendous attachment to the physical world, and her especial delight in both minute creatures for their own sake, and in minute actions for the sake of the dramatic implications that can be loaded into them, hardly needs to be documented. Any number of poems illustrate her delight in the special significance of tiny living things. 'Elysium is as Far' will do as a single example of her delight in packing a total-life significance into the slightest actions: 'What fortitude the Soul contains, / That it can so endure / The accent of a coming Foot -- / The opening of a Door --'

I find myself persuaded, therefore, to think of the fly not as a distraction taking Emily's thoughts from glory and blocking the divine light (When did Emily ever think of living things as a distraction?), but as a last dear sound from the world as the light of consciousness sank from her, i.e. 'the windows failed.' And so I take the last line to mean simply: 'And then there was no more of me, and nothing to see with'." ["Mr. Ciardi writes that he is no longer sure he agrees with all he has said here. He does remain convinced of his central point."]

John Ciardi
"Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died'"
The Explicator XIV (January 1956) Item 22

"In writing her best poems [Emily Dickinson] was never at the mercy of her emotions or of the official rhetoric. She mastered her themes by controlling her language. She could achieve a novel significance, for example, by starting with a death scene that implies the orthodox questions and then turning the meaning against itself by the strategy of surprise answers.... ['I heard a Fly buzz - when I died'] operates in terms of all the standard religious assumptions of her New England, but with a difference. They are explicitly gathered up in one phrase for the moment of death, with distinct Biblical overtones, 'that last Onset - when the King / Be witnessed - in the Room.' But how is he witnessed?

As the poet dramatizes herself in a deathbed scene, with family and friends gathered round, her heightened senses report the crisis in flat domestic terms that bring to the reader's mind each of the traditional questions only to deny them without even asking them. Her last words were squandered in distributing her 'Keepsakes,' trivial tokens of this life rather than messages from the other. The only sound of heavenly music, or of wings taking flight, was the 'Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz' of a fly that filled her dying ear. Instead of a final vision of the hereafter, this world simply faded from her eyes: the light in the windows failed and then she 'could not see to see.'

The King witnessed in his power is physical death, not God. To take this poem literally as an attempted inside view of the gradual extinction of consciousness and the beginning of the soul's flight into eternity would be to distort its meaning, for this is not an imaginative projection of her own death. In structure, in language, in imagery it is simply an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place toward the significance of the moment of death. Yet mystery is evoked by a single word, that extraordinarily interposed color 'Blue.' To misread such a poem would be to misunderstand the whole cast of Dickinson's mind. Few poets saw more clearly the boundary between what can and what cannot be comprehended, and so held the mind within its proper limitations."

Charles R. Anderson

Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise
(Holt 1960) 231-32

"Emily Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died' should be read, I think, with a particular setting in mind—a nineteenth-century deathbed scene. Before the age of powerful anodynes death was met in full consciousness, and the way of meeting it tended to be stereotype. It was affected with a public interest and concern, and was witnessed by family and friends. They crowded the death chamber to await expectantly a burst of dying energy to bring on the grand act of passing. Commonly it began with last-minute bequests, the wayward were called to repentance, the backslider to reform, gospel hymns were sung, and finally as climax the dying one gave witness in words to the Redeemer's presence in the room, how He hovered, transplendent in the upper air, with open arms outstretched to receive the departing soul. This was death's great moment. Variants there were, of course, in case of repentant and unrepentant sinners.

Here in this poem the central figure of the drama is expected to make a glorious exit. The build-up is just right for it, but at the moment of climax 'There interposed a fly.' And what kind of a fly? A fly 'with blue, uncertain stumbling buzz'—a blowfly. How right is Mr. Gerhard Friedrich in his explication...to associate the fly with putrefaction and decay. And how wrong, I think, is Mr. John Ciardi...in calling the fly 'the last kiss of the world,' and speaking of it as one of the small creatures Emily Dickinson so delighted in. She could not possibly have entertained any such view of a blowfly. She was a practical housewife [*sic*], and every housewife abhors a blowfly. It pollutes everything it touches. Its eggs are maggots. It is as carrion as a buzzard.

What we know of Emily Dickinson gives us assurance that just as she would abhor the blowfly she would abhor the deathbed scene. How devastatingly she disposes of the projected one in the poem. 'They talk of hallowed things and embarrass my dog' she writes in 1862 in a letter to Mr. Higginson (*Letters*, 1958, II, 415)."

Caroline Hogue

"Dickinson's 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died'"
The Explicator XX (November 1961) Item 26

"We must imagine the speaker looking back on an experience in which her expectations of death were foiled by its reality. The poem begins with the speaker's perception of the fly, not yet a central awareness both because of the way in which the fly manifests itself (as sound) and because of the degree to which it manifests itself (as a triviality). As a consequence of the speaker's belief in the magnitude of the event and the propriety with which it should be enacted, the fly seems merely indecorous, as yet a marginal disturbance, attracting her attention the way in which something we have not yet invested with meaning does. In a poem very much concerned with the question of vision, it is perhaps strange that the dominant concern in stanza one should be auditory. But upon reflection it makes sense, for the speaker is hearing a

droning in the background before the source of the noise comes into view. The poem describes the way in which things come into view, slowly.

What is striking in the second stanza is the speaker's lack of involvement in the little drama that is being played out. She is acutely conscious that there will be a struggle with death, but she imagines it is the people around her who will undergo it. Her detachment and tranquility seem appropriate if we imagine them to come in the aftermath of pain, a subject that is absent in the poem and whose absence helps to place the experience at the moment before death. At such a moment, the speaker's concern is focused on others, for being the center of attention with all eyes upon her, she is at leisure to return the stare. Her concern with her audience continues in the third stanza and prompts the tone of officiousness there. Wanting to set things straight, the speaker wishes to add the finishing touches to her life, to conclude it the way one would a business deal. The desire to structure and control experience is not, however, carried out in total blindness, for she is clearly cognizant of those 'Keep-sakes' not hers to give. Even at this point her conception of dying may be a preconception but it is not one founded on total ignorance.

The speaker has been imagining herself as a queen about to leave her people, conscious of the majesty of the occasion, presiding over it. She expects to witness death as majestic, too, or so one infers from the way in which she speaks of him in stanza two. The staginess of the conception, however, has little to do with what Charles Anderson calls 'an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of [Dickinson's] time and place toward the significance of the moment of death.' If it did, the poem would arbitrate between the social meanings and personal ones. But the conflict between preconception and perception takes place inside. Or rather preconception gives way only to darkness. For at the conclusion of the third stanza the fly 'interpose[s],' coming between the speaker and the onlookers, between her predictive fantasy of the event and its reality, between life and death. The fact that the fly obscures the former allows the speaker to see the latter. Perspective suddenly shifts to the right thing: from the ritual of dying to the fact of death. It is, of course, the fly who obliterates the speaker's false notions of death, for it is with his coming that she realizes that she is the witness and he the king, that the ceremony is a 'stumbling' one. It is from a perspective schooled by the fly that she writes.

As several previous discussions of the poem have acknowledged, the final stanza begins with a complicated synesthesia: 'With Blue — uncertain stumbling Buzz --'. The adjective 'stumbling' (used customarily to describe only an action) here also describes a sound, and the adverb 'uncertain' the quality of that sound. The fusion would not be so interesting if its effect were not to evoke that moment in perception when it is about to fail. As in a high fever, noises are amplified, the light in the room takes on strange hues, one effect seems indistinguishable from another. Although there is a more naturalistic explanation for the word 'stumbling' (to describe the way in which flies go in and out of our hearing), the poem is so predicated on the phenomenon of displacement and projection (of the speaker's feelings onto the onlookers, of the final blindness onto the 'Windows,' of the fact of perception onto the experience of death) that the image here suggests another dramatic displacement—the fusion of the fly's death with her own. Thus flies when they are about to die move as if poisoned, sometimes hurl themselves against a ceiling, pause, then rise to circle again, then drop.

At this moment the changes the speaker is undergoing are fused with their agent: her experience becomes one with the fly's. It is her observance of that fly, being mesmerized by it (in a quite literal sense now, since death is quite literal), that causes her mind to fumble at the world and lose grip of it. The final two lines 'And then the Windows failed — and then / I could not see to see --' are brilliant in their underlining of the poem's central premise; namely that death is survived by perception, for in these lines we are told that there are two senses of vision, one of which remains to see and document the speaker's own blindness ('and then / I could not see to see --'). The poem thus penetrates to the invisible imagination which strengthens in response to the loss of visible sight.

I mentioned earlier that the poem presumes a shift of perspective, an enlightened change from the preconception of death to its perception. In order to assume that the speaker is educated by her experience, we must assume the fact of it: we must credit the death as a real one. But the fiction required by the poem renders it logically baffling. For although the poem seems to proceed in a linear fashion toward an end, its entire premise is based on the lack of finality of that end, the speaker who survives death to tell her story of

it. We are hence left wondering: How does the poem imagine an ending?" [This critic cannot even imagine the Immortality implied by the speaker having survived death.]

Sharon Cameron
Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre
(Johns Hopkins U 1979)

"And since this was a strange poet, I shall begin with two of the stranger poems; they deal with Death, but they are not from the elegiac poems about suffering the death of others, they are previsions of her own death. In neither does Death present himself as absolute in some brutal majesty, nor in the role of God's dreadful minister. The transaction is homely and easy, for the poet has complete sophistication in these matters, having attended upon deathbeds, and knowing that the terror of the event is mostly for the observers. In the first poem (#465) a sort of comic or Gothic relief interposes, by one of those homely inconsequences which may be observed in fact to attend even upon desperate human occasions. The other poem (#712) is a more imaginative creation. It is a single sustained metaphor, all of it analogue or 'vehicle' as we call it nowadays, though the character called Death in the vehicle would have borne the same name in the real situation or 'tenor.' Death's victim now is the shy spinster, so he presents himself as a decent civil functionary making a call upon a lady to take her for a drive."

John Crowe Ransom
"Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored"
Perspectives USA (1956)

"Like many people in her period, Dickinson was fascinated by death-bed scenes. How, she asked various correspondents, did this or that person die? In particular, she wanted to know if their deaths revealed any information about the nature of the afterlife. In this poem, however, she imagines her own death-bed scene, and the answer she provides is grim, as grim (and, at the same time, as ironically mocking), as anything she ever wrote.

In the narrowing focus of death, the fly's insignificant buzz, magnified tenfold by the stillness in the room, is all that the speaker hears. This kind of distortion in scale is common. It is one of the 'illusions' of perception. But here it is horrifying because it defeats every expectation we have. Death is supposed to be an experience of awe. It is the moment when the soul, departing the body, is taken up by God. Hence the watchers at the bedside wait for the moment when the 'King' (whether God or death) 'be witnessed' in the room. And hence the speaker assigns away everything but that which she expects God (her soul) or death (her body) to take.

What arrives instead, however, is neither God nor death but a fly, '[w]ith Blue — uncertain -- stumbling Buzz,' a fly, that is, no more secure, no more sure, than we are. Dickinson had associated flies with death once before in the exquisite lament, 'How many times these low feet / staggered.' In this poem, they buzz 'on the / chamber window,' and speckle it with dirt, reminding us that the housewife, who once protected us from such intrusions, will protect us no longer. Their presence is threatening but only in a minor way, 'dull' like themselves. They are a background noise we do not have to deal with yet. In 'I heard a Fly buzz,' on the other hand, there is only one fly and its buzz is not only foregrounded. Before the poem is over, the buzz takes up the entire field of perception, coming between the speaker and the 'light' (of day, of life, of knowledge). It is then that the 'Windows' (the eyes that are the windows of the soul as well as, metonymically, the light that passes through the panes of glass) 'fail' and the speaker is left in darkness--in death, in ignorance. She cannot 'see' to 'see' (understand).

Given that the only sure thing we know about 'life after death' is that flies--in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots--devour us, the poem is at the very least a grim joke. In projecting her death-bed scene, Dickinson confronts her ignorance and gives back the only answer human knowledge can with any certainty give. While we may hope for an afterlife, no one, not even the dying, can prove it exists. Like 'Four Trees -- upon a solitary / Acre,' 'I heard a Fly buzz' represents an extreme position [which is?]. I believe that to Dickinson it [what?] was a position that reduced human life to too elementary and meaningless a level. Abdicating belief, cutting off God's hand [?], as in 'I heard a Fly buzz' (a poem that tests precisely this situation), leaves us with nothing. [The speaker has survived death, confirming

Immortality; that is hardly “nothing.”] Not just God, but we ourselves are reduced--a fact that has become painfully evident in twentieth-century literature.”

Paula Bennett
Emily Dickinson, Woman Poet
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“Ironically, the strategy of the poem mimics God’s method, for a reader is enabled to comprehend the value of ‘sight’ here principally by experiencing the horror of its loss. Moreover, the poem even suggests that some ways of engaging with the world during ‘life’ may be no more than forms of animated death. Eating, sleeping, exercising the physical faculties—these alone do not describe ‘life’; and many pass through existence with a form of ‘blindness’ that fatally compromises the integrity of self. Thus the poem offer a counsel to the living by strongly implying the crucial importance of daring ‘to see’ while life still lasts, and one way in which the poet can be Representative is by offering a model of active insight that is susceptible of emulation.”

Cynthia Wolff
Emily Dickinson (copyright 1988)

“In ‘I heard a Fly buzz -- when I died,’ Dickinson employs the Christian narrative model, with its particular eschatological frame of experience, to tell of a deathwatch...but her narrative fails to produce the reality that the Christian narrative represents... Given the two competing frames of experience, the Christian narrative and the body, there arises an ambiguity in the last line of this poem, which can be formulated as two questions: was there more to see--a world beyond experience--and, how is it that the speaker keeps speaking after she claims she ‘could not see,’ presumably meaning she died, since she goes on to say ‘to see’ again? This second ‘to see’ repeats the gesture of the entire poem; it exceeds the limits of narratability itself--to represent a speaker who speaks after death....

The Christian narrative recognizes a self that has a body and a soul. Dickinson’s text recognizes a subjectivity that cannot be split into this dichotomy. Like the body, the text must register presence and the gesture of writing, but it need not delimit either. The question for interpretation is what is it to be alive (as symbolized by the fly) rather than what is the meaning of being alive (as symbolized by the King). ‘I heard a fly buzz when I died’ is told after death, where there can be no writing according to the Christian narrative’s frame of experience. If it does not tell us what happened after death, constricted as it is by its relationship to the prior narrative, the poem nonetheless, as a text, exists beyond the death in exactly the eschatological space the Christian narrative invents.

In many of her narrative poems situated around a death, Dickinson distinguishes the Christian representation of death from the sensations she experiences as a witness of death (and we experience as readers). These distinctive poems are situated at the scene of death neither because Dickinson has any peculiar fascination for death [!], nor simply because she is using stock conventions also to be found in the poetry of her contemporaries. Dickinson uses the convention of the deathwatch as a way to consider the self at a moment when its culturally-assigned significance is weakest, and she does so in order to escape the Christian narrative frame.” [On the contrary, speaking after death confirms the Christian narrative frame.]

Claudia Yukman
“Breaking the Eschatological Frame: Dickinson’s Narrative Acts”
Emily Dickinson Journal 1.1 (1992)

“I heard a Fly buzz when I died” (1866) is the clearest and most powerful expression of Existentialist doubt after the Giant Squid in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Another poem very comparable in vision to Melville’s masterwork is “Exaltation is the going” #76 (c.1859). The many creatures in Dickinson’s poems are her equivalent of the divine white whale, or, in the case of this fly, the squid. Critics have overlooked point of view: The speaker in this poem is *dead!*—in imagination, theory, or “fact.” Although the poem is about experiencing doubt on the verge of death, that the speaker can speak of it afterward is ironic affirmation, even “proof,” of an afterlife—of Immortality. Thomas Pynchon alludes to this poem at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) with a vulgar pun on “fly” that is likewise an anti-climax, but Pynchon is an atheist who satirizes the Christian anticipation of ultimate revelation, whereas Dickinson is a Christian expressing

occasional doubt. Pynchon's punning allusion promotes a perception of himself as a shy reclusive genius comparable to Dickinson, of equivalent literary stature. But he is the fly.

Michael Hollister (2014)