

Writers Aloud

Episode 438

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 438 of *Writers Aloud*. In 'Poetry Break', Emily Berry and Julia Copus discuss the often-overlooked poetry of *Wuthering Heights* author Emily Brontë, focusing on 'I'll Come When Thou Art Saddest'.

Julia Copus: This is 'Poetry Break' for the Royal Literary Fund, I'm Julia Copus and with me today to talk about one of her favourite poems is the poet, editor, and, in her own words, occasional prose writer, Emily Berry. Emily is the author of three collections of poetry, all published by Faber and Faber. Her first, *Dear Boy*, appeared in 2013 and won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Hawthornden Prize.

It was followed in 2017 by *Stranger, Baby*, which explores the loss of the poet's mother in childhood and has been adapted for the stage and translated into Swedish by Jenny Tunedal, as *Picnick, Blixt*; her third collection, *Unexhausted Time*, appeared in 2022 and is a Poetry Book Society Choice.

Emily has a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of East Anglia, as well as MAs in English Literature from Leeds University and in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths. She was, for six years between 2016 and 2022, editor of the *Poetry Review*, the UK's leading poetry journal. In addition to her poetry, she writes sleepcasts or bedtime

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stories for the meditation app *Headspace*. She lives in London where she was born.

So Emily, welcome.

Emily Berry: Thank you.

Julia Copus: It is so nice to be speaking with you and I'm delighted that you've decided to talk about a poem by a poet who seems so rarely to be talked about these days. Could you tell us who that poet is and maybe also why you think she's overlooked, if you have an idea on that?

Emily Berry: Yeah, so the poem is 'I'll Come When Thou Art Saddest' by Emily Brontë. Yeah, it's funny, I think maybe she's obviously super-well-known for *Wuthering Heights*, and I wonder if that has eclipsed her poetry to a degree, because I certainly was not that familiar with her poetry, well, I can't say I'm particularly familiar with the whole oeuvre.

I just came across this poem in – I'm not a hundred percent sure – but I think it was in a book by the American poet Susan Howe called *My Emily Dickinson*, which is a really amazing book: very hard to categorise; it's a kind of creative exploration of Emily Dickinson, but in the book she merges Emilys a bit, and talks about Emily Brontë at one point and quotes this poem.

And I was just really compelled by it when I read it and I think I copied it down straight away and have returned to it often since.

Julia Copus: And you mentioned *Wuthering Heights* and of course, it's right that she should be remembered for that. But I think you're probably right that that is what's eclipsed her reputation as a poet.

So first, I think we should hear it. So the vocabulary is pretty straightforward, I think, but before we listen, are there any unusual or

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difficult words or phrases that you would like to draw our attention to, or anything that you'd like us to listen out for in particular?

Emily Berry: I don't think there's any...the language is all very straightforward, so I don't think there's anything that needs explaining. I would just say, just listen and feel, and see what you feel, listening.

Julia Copus: Yeah, the only one that occurred to me was that it might be worth commenting on 'awful' in the second line of the last stanza, line twelve.

Emily Berry: Okay, yeah as in its contemporary meaning versus...

Julia Copus: Yeah.

Emily Berry: So I suppose she would be meaning *awe inspiring*, sort of *awesome*, the *sublime* kind of stuff rather than *terrible* as we would mean it now.

Julia Copus: Exactly, yeah, so listeners might want to bear that in mind as we hear it. Okay, well, it would be great if you could read the poem for us.

Emily Berry: 'I'll Come When Thou Art Saddest' by Emily Brontë.

I'll come when thou art saddest,
Laid alone in the darkened room;
When the mad day's mirth has vanished,
And the smile of joy is banished
From evening's chilly gloom.

I'll come when the heart's real feeling
Has entire unbiased sway,
And my influence o'er thee stealing,
Grief deepening, joy congealing,
Shall bear thy soul away.

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Listen 'tis just the hour,
The awful time for thee;
Dost thou not feel upon thy soul
A flood of strange sensations roll,
Forerunners of a sterner power,
Heralds of me?

Julia Copus: That's wonderful, isn't it? So, very general question to start with: what would you say the general mood of this poem is, or moods plural, if you had to name them?

Emily Berry: Well, it's funny that you say to name them, because for me the poem is, I guess, about a kind of existential dread, sort of nameless dread. So the mood is pretty dark and bleak. I mean, it does feel *awful* in the contemporary parlance and I suppose when they used the word, they were also thinking of things that were very frightening as well as sort of...

Julia Copus: Awe inspiring, yeah.

Emily Berry: Yeah, like the sublime is associated with things that are so huge that you can't really comprehend them, like awe-inspiring sights or acts of nature. So I guess it's the speaker, which is the sort of personification, for me, of this nameless dread, is saying to the *you* in the poem: *you're being overawed by me*. So I don't know if that's exactly answering your question about moods, but the mood is bleak.

Julia Copus: Yeah. I think that's a brilliant answer and I was going to say that to me, this poem and how we interpret it hinges around the question of identity. So you've already hinted at who you think the 'I' or the speaker of the poem might be, but whoever or whatever it is, it does promise to bring the 'thou' of the poem great comfort, doesn't it?

Emily Berry: Does it?...*Comfort?*

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Julia Copus: Yeah, 'I'll come when thou art saddest'...

Emily Berry: Oh, see, yeah. Probably that speaks to our different dispositions, maybe, because I very much read it as: this phenomenon will emerge just at the worst possible moment, making things even worse.

Julia Copus: Aah. Okay, now I may have been slightly influenced as well by one of my favourite poems, a poem that I go back to again and again, is 'The Glass Essay', by Anne Carson.

Emily Berry: Oh yeah, love that poem.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and she mentions this particular poem in there, and she says – let me just find it, I've got it ready here – it's in the section that she calls *Thou*. And it's page thirty-nine in my copy that I have here, if anyone happens to have that book. She says the 'thou' in Emily Brontë's poems is usually a kind of saviour figure or higher power, so I suppose almost like a God substitute. But in this particular poem she points out that Brontë, 'reverses the roles, speaking not as the victim, but to the victim'.

So this still goes along with what you're saying, but that's so interesting that then from that I took, what they are doing, what the speaker is doing, is promising some kind of comfort to the 'thou'. Almost as if Emily is trying to offer herself comfort because her life wasn't filled with a huge amount of comfort, was it, from the little that we know?

Emily Berry: Well, I guess, yeah, you could definitely see it that she's empowering herself in the sense of...as the writer speaking from the voice of the tyrant, as it were. But to me, the tyrant, the 'I' in the poem is promising some quite unhappy things as in 'Grief deepening, joy congealing'.

And then he's going – well, I say *he*, we don't know, I feel it's a *he* – 'Shall bear thy soul away'. I mean, that doesn't seem a very comforting thing to me.

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Julia Copus: No, but, this is so interesting. So I read that second stanza as all coming from the first phrase, ‘I will come’, so I’m going to, like, ‘come and rescue you’. It doesn’t say that, it just says, ‘I’ll come’. ‘I’ll come when the heart’s real feeling / Has entire unbiased sway’, ‘I’ll come when grief is deepening, joy congealing’, and I ‘shall bear thy soul away’ to somewhere... so if we had to say that ‘I’ was a personification of something, we could say that it was death, perhaps?

I read an essay on the Poetry Foundation website that suggested that the ‘I’ could be the imagination. So when you’re at your very saddest, ‘I’ will come and ‘bear thy soul away’, to somewhere that the imagination can take you that is more pleasant. So yeah.

Emily Berry: Oh, that’s interesting, to think of it as the imagination. I guess to me, I’d find it quite hard to let go of the impression that there’s something quite disturbing happening especially with the final stanza. This talk of ‘A flood of strange sensations.../Forerunners of a sterner power.’ So the ‘sterner power’ is whoever this phenomenon is and the sensations are heralding their arrival.

Julia Copus: Yeah, I still see that that *could* be the imagination. So ‘sterner’ as in: I have more power than the grief that you’re experiencing. ‘Dost thou not feel upon thy soul / A flood of strange sensations roll’, I mean, that does happen when the imagination takes over. And I suppose as well, going back to that word ‘awful’, because it has almost opposite meanings: if we read it as a time full of wonder, it’s like, isn’t this great? ‘Dost thou not feel upon thy soul / a flood of strange’ – not necessarily unpleasant – ‘sensations roll’.

Emily Berry: Yeah, that’s really interesting; it’s just making me think of... so, because for me, I guess, I’ve really identified with what I imagine is the experience in this poem, of being overtaken by a sort of unbearable feeling. But of course, that’s my biased, relating thing, which isn’t necessarily the best way to read poetry.

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Julia Copus: Well, and ditto.

Emily Berry: It just made me think of the kind of contemporary idea, or I don't know what you'd call it, but with experiences of anxiety for example, it's said that the physical sensation of anxiety is very similar to the physical sensation of excitement.

And it's just about how you interpret it in your mind and that you know... in CBT or whatever, if you were able to say to yourself, *Oh, that's just excitement*, then you could feel calmer. So that seems, like, similar to what you're saying: is it wonderful, is it terrible, fearful? And maybe that's the key to the poem in that it is really ambiguous.

Julia Copus: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Berry: And those kind of feelings, I guess, are somewhere in the middle, like, depending on how you make use of it.

Julia Copus: Yeah, possibly that ambiguity was, a) intended, and b) gives the poem an even greater power. I'm just thinking maybe this is a time at which we should bring in a little bit of context about Emily's own life. Because it's quite a hard life to reach into, because we only get these oblique glimpses of it mainly via her big sister Charlotte Brontë's introduction to *Wuthering Heights*, which sometimes reads as a kind of excuse for the strangeness of the book and the savagery of it. And then there's also Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte.

So we know that Emily Brontë was the fifth of six children, she was born in the summer of 1818 in the parsonage at Thornton in Yorkshire to the Reverend Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell. So that surname Branwell was given to her brother whose first name was Branwell. So what do we know about her surroundings and the kind of landscape around the parsonage where they lived?

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Emily Berry: Yeah, I mean, she lived in a very wild, rugged landscape that she was very attached to; was quite reclusive and just a mysterious character. And then of course the family had terrible tragedies, so that Emily and Charlotte and Anne and Branwell had all lost...they'd lost their mother and two older sisters before they were even ten.

So there's certainly reasons why she might be writing poems that are less than cheerful, but equally why she might be writing poems that are attempting to take power over the uncontrollable forces of life and find comfort.

Julia Copus: So the word that you mentioned there and to describe her character, 'reclusive', is a brilliant word, I think; again, a lot of this comes from Charlotte's description of her, but do you think she was...she was certainly isolated; do you think she was lonely as well, or do you think the landscape in some way compensated for those feelings of loneliness?

Emily Berry: It would be impossible to say, but all humans experience loneliness, I would imagine, regardless of whether you're from a big family or a sociable person or whatever. The sort of interior loneliness is present at times, and this poem, to me, definitely speaks of someone who has experienced loneliness, 'Laid alone in a darkened room': it's quite a simple image, but yet quite evocative.

Julia Copus: Yeah. And also actually it's '*the* darkened room', which I almost read...I thought it could be the coffin, you know, 'I'll come when thou art saddest / Laid alone in the darkened room', it's interesting that it's 'the'. Well maybe going back to the poem now and thinking about the technical makeup of the lines, there's a very definite rhyme scheme, isn't there?

Emily Berry: Yeah.

Julia Copus: So it seems to rhyme all the way through ABAAB. So, in

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other words: the first, third and fourth lines rhyme, and so do the second and the last. So, we've got: 'saddest', 'vanished', 'banished' and then 'room' and 'gloom' in that first stanza, and then we've got: 'feeling', 'stealing', 'congealing', and then, 'sway' and 'away', and then last stanza we've got... what have we got, Emily?

Emily Berry: Well, we've got...this has got an extra line, so we've been flummoxed. So we've got: 'soul' and 'role', 'hour' and 'power', 'thee' and 'me', so there's an extra line rhyming with...the scheme changes, basically.

Julia Copus: It does, which is really interesting, I think. Mr Google, or Mr Wikipedia calls it – which shows I think probably how rare it is – “The Road Not Taken” form.

Emily Berry: Wow.

Julia Copus: After the Robert Frost poem; so: 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, / And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveller, long I stood'...so 'wood' and 'stood'; 'And looked down one as far as I could / To where it bent in the undergrowth'...

So you've got 'both' and 'growth'. So yeah, it's that ABAAB thing. But I think what you said about it being interrupted in the final stanza is very interesting.

Emily Berry: Yeah, for me it adds a bit of discombobulation, somehow; this sort of extra line and rhyme just kind of emphasises for me the discomfort of what's happening.

Julia Copus: Yeah, it is literally unsettling.

Emily Berry: Yeah, because the rhythm is really... it's really lovely to read; like, it kind of rolls off the tongue somehow.

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Julia Copus: Yeah.

Emily Berry: Like the ‘flood of strange sensations’; that ‘roll’.

Julia Copus: Yeah, in the Robert Frost poem, it’s four beats all the way through, so ‘Two **roads diverged** in a **yellow wood**’, and ‘**Sorry I could not travel both**’, and da dee da dee da, it goes all the way through. This one is all three beats:

I’ll **come** when **thou** art **saddest**,
Laid **alone** in the **darkened room**,
When the **mad** day’s **mirth** has **vanished**,
And the **smile** of **joy** is **banished**
From the **evening’s chilly gloom**.

But then, like you said, in the last stanza, *I love* that, she starts off like that: ‘Listen ’tis just the hour’, so one, two, three. ‘The **awful time** for **thee**’. And then lengthens into four beats in those lovely lines that you picked out. ‘Dost **thou** not **feel** upon thy **soul** / A **flood** of **strange** sensations **roll**’. So they just become longer and lengthen into these four beats.

Well, I’ll ask you what you think it’s doing, because it actually says ‘strange sensations’, and then there’s that really short line, isn’t there, at the end?

Emily Berry: Yeah, I suppose it kind of like, aurally, *owrally* – I never know how to pronounce that word – embodies what it’s describing. So, it suddenly changes the number of beats, as it’s saying, ‘Does thou not feel upon thy soul / A flood of strange sensations roll’.

Julia Copus: Yeah, so ‘Forerunners of a sterner power’...I’d say those three lines, four beats, and then this really short line, two beats, ‘Heralds of me?’; so, it’s really foreshortened.

Emily Berry: Well it’s interesting it ends on a question mark as well, like,

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for me the poem is all about – and that’s informed my reading of it – it’s about anticipation and that’s what, I guess...I’m someone personally who finds anticipation very difficult, so for many people it would be considered excitement but for me it’s always like, dread. And in this poem it’s like: don’t you feel these strange sensations, ‘Forerunners’, so it’s all like, what’s being described in the poem hasn’t actually happened yet.

Julia Copus: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, and that is picked up in the future tense, ‘I’ll come’, I will come, and again, I will come. Then I find that change in the last stanza again, into the present tense, brings us very suddenly into the now with that word ‘*Listen ’tis just the hour*’ and it’s like: *Oh my god, it’s happening now!*

And then all those ‘s’ sounds as well. ‘Listen, ’tis just the hour’, ‘Dost thou not feel upon thy soul / A flood of strange sensations roll’. It sounds like a kind of...I don’t know if it’s urgent, but a whispering.

Emily Berry: Yeah, what did they call it...susurrations, it adds to it, because you could imagine this sort of...what do you call that when you’ve got like a brush that you play a drum or a tambourine with or something?

Julia Copus: Yeah.

Emily Berry: That kind of musical, I’m just...I’ve not got the vocabulary for talking about music at all, but that kind of sound that ushers in anticipation of something.

Julia Copus: Yeah, if there isn’t a word for it, there absolutely should be. Yeah, so it’d be nice to finish by talking about the various possibilities as to who the ‘I’ of the poem might be, if we go back to thinking about that. We’ve said it might be death and I talked about the second line then becomes like a kind of coffin, ‘Laid alone in the darkened room.’

I just wanted to mention as well briefly, that Charlotte Mew, I always try

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and get Charlotte Mew into every conversation! So she wrote an essay on Emily Brontë's poems, and she says there, specifically about death, that – do you know, this could almost be *the key* – she says that 'it brought no terror to this girl who mused habitually upon facts and mysteries more terrible. It was no problem because it was the end of problems'. And that kind of makes death both terrifying as it is for most people, but also a comfort at the same time.

Emily Berry: Yeah, that's interesting. I'm interested in her saying that this girl was musing on things 'more terrible' all the time. I'm interested in the second stanza where it says, 'I'll come when the heart's real feeling / Has entire unbiased sway', and what the 'real feeling' is, because it seems to imply that the real feeling is the sadness.

Julia Copus: To you; and to me, the 'real feeling' is the opposite of reality, is imagination, is where we go in our own minds, possibly. Sorry, I interrupted you.

Emily Berry: No, no; yeah, I'm just kind of interested in what...as well as wondering who the 'I' is, what the 'real feeling' is that is so, kind of, in charge. And because obviously for me, I was reading it as loneliness or sadness, and wondering why that should be more 'real' than say, 'the mad day's mirth', even the fact that it's 'the mad day', which seems to devalue it somehow.

Julia Copus: Yes, yeah.

Emily Berry: And 'the smile of joy', it's not the *smiles* of joy, or it somehow seems to imply that those things are transient and less significant than whatever is happening here.

Like, whether it's something positive or negative, which maybe are not really appropriate descriptors anyway. What's happening here seems to be huge, and the more important factor of this life, that the 'you' is

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experiencing, or the ‘thee’, because if we’re asking who is the ‘I’, then the question is also who is the ‘thee’.

Julia Copus: Yeah, or the ‘thou’, yeah. And actually the section in Anne Carson’s book is called ‘Thou’ and she talks about this connection between ‘I’ and ‘thou’, between Emily and this ‘thou’ figure. So I suppose to end with, my final question would be, do you think we need to pin it down in this way or do you think the ambiguity *is* part of the power of this poem?

Emily Berry: Yeah, I mean it’s interesting to consider, but I do think the poet is playing around with something that is sort of nameless, so in a way to try and name it is beside the point, but at the same time that’s inevitable, we always want to try and name the nameless.

Julia Copus: Yeah. But it’s kind of demanding to remain nameless, really, I suppose, which does for me lend a strength that it could be both those things actually, the comfort and the sadness of death.

Emily Berry: Definitely. Especially that it ends on a question mark. It’s not saying, the poem is signed off, and it’s sort of just leaving it open.

Julia Copus: Yeah. Well, I think that is a very good note on which to end this part of the podcast Emily. Thank you so much for talking to me about one of your favourite poems, ‘I’ll Come When Thou Art Saddest’ by Emily Brontë.

Emily Berry: My pleasure.

Julia Copus: So, my Emily Brontë poem, *my* Emily Brontë poem!...is a few lines shorter than the one that you chose, it’s twelve lines, in fact. And it is, ‘The Night is Darkening Round Me’. And I’ve read that it’s sometimes known as ‘Spellbound’, but I’m not sure if that was Emily’s own title or if it was added later by an editor. Anyway, the vocab is pretty straightforward again.

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Maybe just a couple of things to listen out for before we hear the poem: I think it's good to be aware of the possible double meaning of 'yet', in line eight, 'And *yet* I cannot go'. So, that last line of the second stanza, 'The storm is fast descending / And *yet* I cannot go'. So, I think she means *yet* as in, *even so*, but also yet in the more old fashioned sense of *still*, and *still* I cannot go.

As if, however bad things get, she still can't leave this place. And then maybe the word 'Wastes' in line ten, so the second line of the last stanza, that's a word that isn't often used today in the sense that I think it's meant in this poem. So, 'Wastes beyond, wastes below'. So, *wastes* as in large areas of empty land, like the moors where Emily went walking. And then 'drear', obviously, we've got the word *dreary*. But I think it has more of the meaning of *bleak*, or something like that. So those are the words that I would pick out to listen out for; so:

The Night is Darkening Round Me

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.

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So it turns out that both the poems we've chosen were written in 1837, when Emily Brontë was nineteen.

Emily Berry: Wow.

Julia Copus: Yeah, that really surprised me and just a complete coincidence; and *Wuthering Heights* was published ten years later, not long before her death; I think she died at the age of thirty. So anyway, this poem is simpler in most things: in rhyme, in metre and structure, than the first one that we looked at.

So we've got these three stanzas of four lines, these three quatrains, and it just rhymes ABAB, all the way through. So 'me', 'blow', 'me', 'go', et cetera. And again, metre-wise, it's those same three-beat lines, 'The night is darkening round me / The wild winds coldly blow;' one, two, three, one, two, three.

Unlike the first poem, those three-beat lines keep going right through to the end with no variation at all. And I think...sorry, you were going to say something there?

Emily Berry: You might have heard me thinking, but I was thinking the fact that the metre doesn't change is sort of emblematic of what's happening in the poem, she's describing this kind of state of intense inertia, it seems like.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and to me that lack of variation in terms of those general patterns of sound, like you say, reflects a kind of unbending state of mind. There's no change to the speaker's mood in this particular poem, do you think?

Emily Berry: Yeah, it just seems like this, I don't know...a kind of claustrophobia that if it changes it's only intensifying it, there's no release, because you've just got the repeated refrain, 'I cannot, cannot go'. And

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then the last line is ‘I will not’, so it’s almost like...it’s not that they are held against their will somehow, they are *wilfully* not moving, whatever that might mean. We don’t know if it’s a psychological stasis or a kind of physical one.

Julia Copus: Yeah, but either way, they don’t want to go; something is keeping them there. And it’s all in the present tense too, so your poem started with those *I’ll do this, I’ll do that*. And this is all very present, which does give a sense of immediacy, doesn’t it? ‘The storm’ is coming down right now.

And I think I chose this poem partly because I find that consistency very moving. It seems so close to what we know about Emily Brontë’s life that it’s hard not to identify the speaker with her. So she is standing there stubbornly, almost, in all this bleakness with the storm coming in, but at the same time there’s a kind of turn in every single stanza, by which I mean...so each stanza begins with a statement: ‘The night is darkening round me’, ‘The giant trees are bending’, et cetera. But then after the statements we get those turning words: ‘But’, in line three, and then we get ‘And yet’ in the final line of the second stanza and then ‘But’ again in the penultimate line, the line eleven that introduce some sort of opposition or antithesis to this statement that she’s just made.

Emily Berry: Yeah, it’s I think it’s similar to the previous poem in that what is being conjured is some kind of quite mysterious state that the speaker can’t understand and neither can the reader. Because even the description of the storm and the, ‘I will not [...] go’. Because you’re thinking, well, if a storm is coming in, you wouldn’t want to go anyway because you would just stay in, hunker down or ‘shelter in place’ as the Americans call it.

Julia Copus: Do they, I didn’t know that?

Emily Berry: Yeah, so you know when we talked about ‘lockdown’, they much more nicely referred to ‘sheltering in place’.

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Julia Copus: I like that. I mean, would just run, I'd want to get home. In fact, this does happen on our walk sometimes, I end up absolutely soaked. So perhaps I'm a bit simple, but there you go...

Emily Berry: Well, actually, you know, for some reason, I imagine this poem taking place in a house and that the storm was happening outside, but of course that's not what's happening because she talks about, 'The night is darkening round me/The wild winds...' Yeah, so I don't know why I thought that. I think I was still in the world of the other poem, 'Laid alone in the darkened room'.

Julia Copus: That's very interesting to me that you imagined it in a house. But I'm going to come back to that soon...something to wait for. But it is very strange, here's this woman in this bleak landscape and I'm imagining Emily herself on the moors around Haworth.

Emily Berry: Yeah, twigs in her hair.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and she just cannot move from it. Then that line that you said about, the final line, 'I will not, cannot go'. So *will* as in the sense of refusal, but perhaps mainly, *I do not want to go*. And I wonder what it is that's keeping her there, what do you think?

Emily Berry: I don't know, but there's some sense of her as this...well, this is mythologizing now, but as this sort of wild woman of nature who is just at one with the elements and wants to just be among them, whatever is happening, rather than fleeing home.

Julia Copus: Yeah. From the little that I know about Emily Brontë herself, I get this sense of deep, deep, deep connection. I mean, it's there in *Wuthering Heights*, of course, between herself and the landscape around her in a way that probably most people living today, by no means everybody, but most people, don't experience on a daily basis. So yeah.

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Sound-wise, there is a fair bit of alliteration here, so especially *Ws* and *Bs*. We've got: 'wild winds', 'weighed with', 'wastes' twice, 'Wastes beyond waste'. And then with the *Bs*, we've got: 'bound', 'bending', 'boughs', well, 'bare boughs' in fact, 'beyond' and 'beyond'.

Emily Berry: And loads of *Os*.

Julia Copus: Loads of *Os* too, yeah.

Emily Berry: 'Wild winds' that 'coldly blow', the 'tyrant spell' that's 'bound', 'I cannot, cannot go', there's 'boughs', 'snow' 'storm', 'cannot go' again, 'Clouds beyond clouds above', 'beyond', 'below' 'nothing', 'move', 'not', 'cannot go'.

Julia Copus: Yeah, the *Cs* as well, it's just *packed* with assonance and consonance. So we've got 'coldly', 'cannot', 'cannot', *cannot* four times in fact. And then 'Clouds', which is also repeated. So it's really, really tight in that respect, isn't it? — Which kind of, I suppose, enacts the containment; that it's a limiting space, although it's also vast at the same time. 'Clouds beyond clouds' and 'Wastes beyond wastes'. So...

Emily Berry: Yeah, it's describing this infinite, wild experience, but then it's kind of dialling it right down into this contained, confined form.

Julia Copus: Yeah. And I suppose the repetition also reinforces that idea of stubbornness, doesn't it? Sticking to one's guns, this kind of steely resistance. It's almost like she's expecting the reader of the poem to want to get away, or to want her to get away from these 'wild winds' and the cold and the coming storms et cetera. Yeah, instead she's standing there kind of in defiance.

Emily Berry: But then she does say 'a tyrant spell has bound me', so it's like she's admitting some sort of external force similar to the 'me' in the previous poem.

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Julia Copus: Yeah, so you used the word ‘tyrant’ when we were talking about that.

Emily Berry: Yeah, because I was thinking of this poem, actually, because I noticed the link.

Julia Copus: Yeah, yeah. So that does suggest, doesn’t it, some sort of oppression or subjugation or something? And I was thinking about the word ‘tyrant’ and going back to ‘The Glass’ essay again, Anne Carson quotes an instance of the word ‘tyrant’ in another of Emily Brontë’s poems, which I will now have to find. So she says in another of the poems, ‘Unconquered in my soul, the tyrant rules me still/ Life bows to my control but love I cannot kill’.

So in that instance, the ‘tyrant spell’ is a type of *love*, but maybe not necessarily for a person. You know, it could be that the love is for the landscape itself that has this spell over her. So, that aspect of loving the landscape, of this connection with it, and I said it was quite rare, does remind me a little bit of your poem, another of my favourite poems, ‘Canopy’, where the trees are bending over the speaker in a kind of protective, motherly embrace. And that’s why I found it so fascinating when you said, ‘Well, I initially imagined this inside the house’.

Emily Berry: Yeah, it’s funny because when you said, ‘Oh, I’m just going to ask you about something else later’, that came to mind and I was like, *Oh, I wonder if I’m reading it through the lens of that poem?* Because I hadn’t made that connection myself at all until just now. But yeah, there is a similar description of these wild trees, but that is set indoors.

Julia Copus: Yeah, and the first line is, ‘The weather was inside’, is that right?

Emily Berry: See if I can remember it: ‘The weather was inside. // The branches trembled over the grass as if to apologise; and then they thumped and they came in.’

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Julia Copus: Oh yeah, ‘thumped’, amazing, well, you’re going to have to go and find it because I wondered if you might just read the last stanza for us?

Emily Berry: So just the final stanza?

Julia Copus: Maybe if you go from, ‘They got inside us’.

Emily Berry: Okay.

They got inside us and made us speak; I said my first word in their language: ‘canopy’.

I was crying and it felt like I was feeding. Be my mother, I said to the trees, in the language of trees, which can’t be transcribed, and they shook their hair back, and they bent low with their many arms, and they looked into my eyes, as only trees can look into the eyes of a person, they touched me with the rain on their fingers, till I was all droplets, till I was a mist, and they said they would.

Julia Copus: I think that is a brilliant poem, and I find it very, very moving. And I think it’s a poem that Emily Brontë would get immediately. It feels to me like a very Brontë-esque connection with the landscape, but the landscape as a compensation or a reparation for loneliness...or if not quite that, a substitute for some kind of absence. Yeah, that’s what it means to me as a, as a reader anyway.

Emily Berry: Yeah, I think that’s definitely in there.

Julia Copus: But don’t you love this kind of echoing and interconnection, interweaving of poems through the centuries, because I’m just wondering whether I read the poem that you chose, ‘I’ll Come When Thou Art Saddest’ – because I know your poem ‘Canopy’ quite well – whether I

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was thinking of the landscape as a much more comforting presence, the eye of the poem, than you were.

But I just, I love that conversation through the ages between poems. I think it's enriching of the poems themselves.

Emily Berry: Yeah, totally. And I just realised, for example, I hadn't read a lot of Emily Brontë's work at the time that I wrote *Stranger Baby*, which that poem is from, but I had read a lot of Anne Carson. And as we've been discussing, Anne Carson has obviously written about Emily Brontë, and you know it's possible that I'd absorbed Emily Brontë through Anne Carson as it were, which is this amazing sort of lineage thing that happens in literature I think.

Julia Copus: Well, Emily, I just want to thank you for being such a fantastic guest today, and for sharing your time and your insights with us. Thank you so much.

Emily Berry: Oh, thank you for having me. It's been really fun.

Julia Copus: Emily Berry. And Emily's latest collection is *Unexhausted Time*, published by Faber. She's also the author of the lyric essay, 'The Secret Country of Her Mind', about Agoraphobia, dreams, and the imagination, which appears in the artist's book *Many Nights*, by Jackie Kenny.

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RLF outro: That was Emily Berry in conversation with Julia Copus. You can find out more about Emily on her website, emilyberry.co.uk. And that concludes episode 438, which was recorded and produced by Julia Copus. Coming up in episode 439, Jeremy Treglown speaks with Ann Morgan about choosing biographical subjects, the fallibility of memory, trying to tell real life stories fairly, and the experience of being a critic, as well as an author.

We hope you'll join us.

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