

Writers Aloud

Episode 394

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 394 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode in another instalment of our special 'Poetry Break' series, the poets Lawrence Sail and our host Julia Copus discuss two favourite classic poems by Emily Dickinson, 'I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died' and 'I Could Die Tomorrow'.

Julia Copus: This is 'Poetry Break' for the Royal Literary Fund, I'm Julia Copus and joining me today is the poet, reviewer and translator Lawrence Sail.

Lawrence has written thirteen books of poems, his *Waking Dreams: New and Selected Poems*, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 2010 and received a Poetry Book Society's special commendation. Besides his own books of poetry, he has edited a number of poetry anthologies among them, *First and Always: Poems for Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital* published by Faber in 1988. He's also written two books of essays and two memoirs, the most recent of which, *Accidentals*, is illustrated by his daughter Erica Sail and was published in December 2020.

He has served on the management committee of the Society of Authors and also directed the Cheltenham Festival of Literature. He's the recipient of a Hawthornden Fellowship, an Arts Council writer's bursary, and a Cholmondeley Award, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: Lawrence, hello.

Lawrence Sail: Hello there.

Julia Copus: So today we are talking about a giant in the poetry world, Emily Dickinson. So Lawrence tell us which Dickinson poem you've chosen today and why you've chosen it?

Lawrence Sail: Well, I think it was part of... a specific part, if you like, of the general huge excitement I felt at discovering Emily Dickinson's work which I did, I'm slightly ashamed to say rather late on, only about twenty years ago. A rather strange coincidence gave a particular angle to my particular liking for this poem. In the National Gallery there's a wonderful painting done almost exactly 400 years before Emily Dickinson wrote this poem. And it's of an unknown woman of the Hofer family, so about 1470. And she's holding a Forget-Me-Not and she's has a hugely elaborate headdress, which the painter has rendered *beautifully* in exquisite detail. But two-thirds of the way back on this exquisite embroidered headdress there is a fly, and the fly has been painted with terrific attention to detail. It's said sometimes that maybe the painter was trying to suggest to the spectator that the fly had landed on the painting rather than was an integral part of it. And of course, a fly in terms of artistic iconography was often used as an emblem for either evil or mortality. So it was that mortality bit that I was reminded of, hugely, when I first read the Emily Dickinson.

Julia Copus: What a great way into a poem. Has its appeal altered for you in any way since that first encounter?

Lawrence Sail: Well no, but as with so many Emily Dickinson poems I think the apparent artlessness and the odd effect of the punctuation syntax: her wide use of dashes... what are they, are they hesitations, are they pauses, are they telling us like a musical score about the tempo? I don't know any other poet who when you read her, you almost seem to be reading the unedited movements of her mind, her pauses for thought.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: No, absolutely. The first line is extraordinary. I think we'll get on to discussing the poem in a moment. But before we do that, we should listen to it. The language is pretty straightforward isn't it, but is there anything you think we should listen out for, or anything that you want to flag up before we have a listen?

Lawrence Sail: Well of course, one of the immediate questions is how do you read this aloud, do you read over the dashes? I don't myself, I think another aspect of them of course, is the reader's breathing and breath, and the poem about 'death', rhyming with 'breath'.

Julia Copus: There's that phrase isn't there: 'Between the Heaves of Storm'.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Wonderful.

Julia Copus: Which is something to listen out for, because it's difficult to pick up maybe on a first reading. So that's in the fourth line there, isn't it, 'Between the heavens of...'. Would you read the poem for us?

Lawrence Sail: I'll be delighted to.

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 portions of me be
Assignable — and then it was
There interposed a Fly —

Writers Aloud

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

Julia Copus: What I really liked about the way you read that was that you honoured the punctuation, the dashes, but still allowed us to hear the pulse of the poem underneath. We could hear that sort of ballad form: four beat, three beat, four beat, three beat, in the way you read. Usually people are either going: ‘I heard a fly buzz when I died, the stillness in the room’ or it’s totally disjointed and you can’t hear the underlying, what we’re calling pulse. So that was great.

So I think before we get down to the nitty-gritty, would you mind just walking us through those four stanzas, just very briefly in terms of content; in terms of what’s going on?

Lawrence Sail: Yes, well, I think the point that persists from the first line onwards is the sense of what is heard, the auditory sense.

There are two pulses, to use that word again at work here: there’s the auditory and the visual. And they’re beautifully played off against each other. So the first four lines are entirely to do with hearing: what is heard, what is not heard, the stillness of silence. Contrasted with the ‘Heaves of Storm’, the noise of the fly buzzing, that’s auditory. The second verse then changes or at least it introduces another element: ‘The Eyes around —’, so here’s the visual sense. Then that is played off in turn against, by return to ‘Breaths were gathering firm’. So that’s hearing and sight and the view, if you like — again, astonishing, the dead or dying person running a commentary on the about-to-be mourners.

Julia Copus: So the second stanza is set in the room, isn’t it?

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Yes.

Julia Copus: And the mourners are standing about, and as you say, the dying person is commentating. I was listening to a podcast as I drove down about death and dying, and there's some new research that's been done in China. I think they have ascertained that the sense of hearing is the last thing to go. Even after most of your consciousness has gone, there's that consciousness of sound.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, that's not entirely new.

Julia Copus: But I think this was the first time they've actually asked dying people to have electric pads on their heads or sensors, and found it to be true.

Lawrence Sail: So that confirmed it?

Julia Copus: Yes. Sorry, I interrupted.

Lawrence Sail: That's alright, and then an entirely new tack again, in the third verse, 'I willed my Keepsakes — '. So this is essentially the dead person taking the measure, not of other people in the room, but of herself and in particular there seems to me to be an underlying question: what am I in control of, what can I not control?

Julia Copus: Oh yes. I completely agree. So she's there signing away her belongings.

Lawrence Sail: Yes.

Julia Copus: 'Signed away / What portion of me be / assignable —' I almost hear that as: what portion of me be controllable?

Lawrence Sail: Yes, absolutely. I quite agree. So, it's really measuring the

Writers Aloud

limitations of the human will, isn't it, and saying I can only control this up to a point.

Julia Copus: So that begs the question, I suppose: what is the portion of her that *isn't* assignable. I suppose we could call it the soul or...?

Lawrence Sail: Well, yes. Also don't you think there's a sense of signing away...there are two surrenders going on, there's a surrender of human ability to control their circumstances, but there's also the surrender to death of course. And it's not quite contemptuous, but it's on the way, isn't it: 'Signed away / What portion of me *be* / assignable —'. And as I read it, then, in the last line of that third verse: 'There interposed a Fly —', we come full circle back to the fly. A wonderful excursion!

Yes. So that doesn't the fly represent the circumstantial, the accidental, the beyond human control?

Julia Copus: Yes. Yes.

Lawrence Sail: As well as mortality.

Julia Copus: And it comes when the griever, or the mourner, are expecting the arrival of 'the King' and instead, 'There interposed'...I love that word!

Lawrence Sail: I was just going to say, isn't it wonderful? Because 'pose' and 'poise': the dying on the whole are not quite as poised and if you're in pain, you shriek, you don't write a sonnet! If you're dying, you tend not to write beautiful slant rhyme and use words like 'interpose'. So really the first verse: 'the Room'; the poet's perception. The second verse: the embryo mourners. The third verse: looking into her own feelings and then moving out again and then that wonderful...and it's when we get back to the room, don't we, and we get a *hint* of the outside. And I love in the final verse, the idea of the windows failing, there's a long established tradition of the eyes as the windows of the soul. 'I could not see, to see —'.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: So do you see...they could either be the windows in the room or, as you say, the dying person's eyes. Do you see one or the other or...?

Lawrence Sail: No, I like to see both. But don't you also think that the idea in a way, almost incongruous, the idea of the windows failing, in the sense of windows in the room and the idea of the failure of light to come in.

Julia Copus: Yeah. Fantastic.

Lawrence Sail: This is Dylan Thomas, isn't it, 'The dying of the light'?

Julia Copus: Yes. Yes.

Lawrence Sail: So it has that brilliant...and it's that ambivalence, that's a brilliant choice of word. And then of course coming around to the other meaning: 'I could not see to see —', both in terms of seeing with the eyes and seeing through the window. They're both an interior and exterior view; both fail.

Julia Copus: So this is, I suppose, the suggestion of seeing as perception. And then the physical sight.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, certainly. Yes, indeed.

Julia Copus: Taking a step back from the poem and looking at these objects that you've mentioned. So we've got: the fly, the room, the eyes and the breaths that are more ethereal, the king and the fly and the mourners standing around. That mention of 'the King' in line seven...

Lawrence Sail: Yes. What do you make of that?

Julia Copus: Well, because the word is placed at the end of the line, so we know it's important, but then that's not mentioned again at all, so it draws attention to itself and then vanishes completely.

Writers Aloud

What do *I* make of it? I'm more interested in what *you* think of it! But I suppose she is talking about God, but also about expectation, that people are expecting this grand moment and actually what comes instead is this uncertain, stumbling, buzzing fly.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. 'The King', as I read it, it's again like so many other things in the poem, it's not quite as simple as it appears, 'when the King / Be witnessed', now, how do you read, 'Be witnessed'? It could mean when the truth of the king's existence is borne witness to by death. 'The King', as I read it could be death itself, or indeed as you were saying, God, and given her background and her history almost certainly is that, but I don't think there's absolute certainty. But one thing that's certain about 'the King' is that by definition he exercises control, he's a totality. And there's perhaps an interesting play off between 'the King' and the fly, the fly representing the human condition, coincidence, fate.

Julia Copus: And the uncertainty of...

Lawrence Sail: And uncertainty indeed, the circumstantial. So again, rather as when you were saying to me, which of the readings of the word 'windows' do I like, and I greedily said I'd like both please. I feel rather the same with 'the King'. Think of the number of Dickinson poems that have a 'he', a man, a king, God, often glancingly, often referred to and then sheered away from. I'd love to know whether she ever thought this was slightly amusing. In other words, you know...

Julia Copus: I think there's definitely humour.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. I think so. Yes.

Julia Copus: So just to bring in a tiny bit of context, when I was thinking about this podcast, I had a vague memory that she wanted to commit to Christianity but wasn't quite able to, and then I came across this letter about her thoughts on religion that she wrote in 1846.

Writers Aloud

So she was born in 1830, so she would've been fifteen, sixteen. So years before this poem was written in 1863, she wrote to her friend, Abiah Root, who was a fully committed Christian. And she said, 'I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections', and she said that she couldn't fully commit to God for that reason.

So it seems to me that this poem is partly about where we place our attention. Instead of being distracted by whether or not you believe in that sense, we might instead pay humble attention to these tiny...the moment-by-moment occurrences, even if the thing that appears is just a fly.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. You could imagine it being the work of a convinced agnostic. That's a very interesting suggestion, I think that in a sense she doesn't evade the question, but it's a kind of token genuflection.

Julia Copus: Yes, because I think she agonized about her relationship to God and she didn't join the church in the end. But not out of defiance, just in order to remain true to herself. So I think she's trying to get away from that agonizing.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And I suppose another aspect might be that there's an almost monastic dedication to the long-term subjects: death, love, eternity and so on. And you would certainly say that she had a highly developed religious sense.

Julia Copus: Yes.

Lawrence Sail: Which is not of course the same as belonging to a particular church. And I suppose therein lies the difference. But she's not being prescriptive; she's not waving something with the aggression of certainty at the reader. She's inviting the reader to follow her in what may be her own uncertain stumbling as she considers and takes as touchstones death, love, immortality.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: Yeah. That effect that she manages to get us to feel, that we are following her thought through the poem is extraordinary given the fact that it is so tightly wrought. So we get the sense of fluidity, along with this, as I said, it's in ballad meter, with four beats, three beats, all the way through.

Lawrence Sail: Yeah, certainly.

Julia Copus: And she was brought up around hymns wasn't she, she was saturated really...

Lawrence Sail: The common measure, indeed yes.

Julia Copus: Yeah. Could we at this point maybe say something about the rhyme as well?

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Rhyme and repetition, which is never repetition of course, because it's in a different place and it's doing a slightly different job, like the repeated word 'stillness': 'The Stillness in the room / Was like the Stillness in the Air —'. 'Air', of course, again links us with breath; 'Stillness' with death.

Julia Copus: And the second and fourth lines are rhyming, aren't they? But as you have said, they are usually half rhymes or slant rhymes.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, absolutely.

Julia Copus: You've got: 'Room', 'Storm', 'firm', 'Room'.

Lawrence Sail: Until, in the final verse, there is a strong rhyme isn't there? — 'me' and 'see' —. So there's a moment of rhyming clarity, and a close here when we're still at a moment of surrender.

Julia Copus: Yes. And the dash right at the end of the poem suggests that surrender, doesn't it?

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Isn't that wonderful. It opens out into — what?

Julia Copus: Yeah. So again, as you say, you've got the definite full rhyme that you've pointed out: 'me' and 'see'. But with it, this jumping off into nowhere with the dash.

Lawrence Sail: I wanted to look at one or two other things. Like for instance, in that same verse, the last verse, the *extraordinary* effect I find... we've got, 'There interposed a Fly —' and we've gone on a big excursion, but we've come back to the fly, and *then*, with 'Blue', I find that there's a multiplicity of things that occur and enrich that very, very simple word. I think of the way in which the external is played off against the internal: the idea of the blue sky's openness, the idea of blue eyes, eyes of course have their part here. And blue of course has quite a strong connection, doesn't it, with illness and disease: blue lips, someone has a heart attack and then turns blue.

Julia Copus: And there's the blue of religion as well. Isn't there?

Lawrence Sail: Yes, indeed, Marian blue. Yes, certainly, and it's such a definite word. It's intriguing isn't it, that placed there at the beginning of a new verse, it really is emphatic with 'Blue —' and the next word is...

Julia Copus: And capitalized as well.

Lawrence Sail: Yes capitalized. And the next word is 'uncertain —'.

Julia Copus: Yeah. After a dash. The other thing that just strikes me is this sort of triple adjective that's given to the fly: 'Blue — uncertain — stumbling', in a poem where there are very few adjectives at all.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, quite. Yes. Well you asked right at the outset, what was it that particularly appealed to me, and I think one of the things that appeals to me about her work in general is the richness, the variety

Writers Aloud

of interpretations, tones, that can be put upon this work. And I think partly it is just what you are saying: that it's not over-adjectival, it keeps a flexibility. And a sort of... not a looseness, because as we've discovered, it's very tightly structured, but despite that, ironically, and it's rather in the same way that in this and many of her poems, the dashes, which you think ought to, and visually look as though they might fragment the thing...

Julia Copus: – and trip you up. Yes –

Lawrence Sail: ...they actually don't. They just give the impression of someone thinking on.

Julia Copus: Yes. It's like they're leading you on.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, exactly. But the dashes in a funny way enable you to be part of the journey much more than separate sentences, or attempts to enrich the language adjectively or adverbially.

And do you think that perhaps the capitalization gives a particular value, a particular depth: that wonderful phrase, 'The Heaves of Storm'? You have to slow down saying it, but the fact that both 'Heaves' and 'Storm' are in capitals, give them a kind of visual emphasis as well, but they don't stop you moving on.

Julia Copus: They don't. No, that's the magic of Emily Dickinson.

Lawrence Sail: Well, I just want to say one thing more. I want to ask you something, which is, how do you account for the fact – and this has to just be part of her genius – the first line 'I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —', no, she didn't! But certainly I find as a reader, I assent *completely*, I don't stop and think: *oh no, she didn't!* You just think: *oh yeah, fine, so then what?*

Julia Copus: You're waiting. And I think partly, it's said with such authority,

Writers Aloud

isn't it? It's partly the tone. It is unarguable with, because she's just telling you: 'when I died', this is what happened!

Lawrence Sail: Quite. Yes.

Julia Copus: There is this sort of iambic pulse in a lot of her poetry: di da di da di da di da, but in that first line that we are talking about, you can't go, 'I *heard* a *Fly* buzz — *when...*' You've got to stress 'buzz' as well.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, exactly.

Julia Copus: And so it's almost like the fly is interposing itself rhythmically in that very first line.

Lawrence Sail: Yes.

Julia Copus: 'I heard a Fly *buzz* — when I died —'

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Quite right. I agree, yes.

Julia Copus: She wants us to notice this fly, doesn't she?

Lawrence Sail: Yes, I think so. Yes.

Julia Copus: Just to finish off, you've said that that last line lifts us out of the poem. I suppose it's about what it means to lose the physical capacity to see. What do you make of it?

Lawrence Sail: Well, it's the only negative in the whole poem, isn't it? 'I could not see to see —', and it in some sense, for me, completes that note of surrender. It links up in a strange way with two things: firstly, that wonderful first line of the second verse, 'The Eyes around — had wrung them dry —'

Julia Copus: Yeah. And I suppose that means wrung themselves dry?

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Well, it does, but it also echoes in my mind as people in grief wringing their hands.

Julia Copus: Yes, definitely.

Lawrence Sail: So again, we are noticing things that have more than one connection. And indeed, that then leads on to the idea that they had somehow pulled themselves together for that last moment. They had, in a sense, *come to terms with*; they had accepted that this was a deathbed scene. And it seems to me that that runs out brilliantly at the end of the poem on more than one level again: ‘And then the Windows failed’, we’ve already suggested the actual windows were the windows of the eyes, the windows of the soul, ‘and then I could not see to see —’, that has, I suppose to honour her properly, one ought to call it provisional finality.

Julia Copus: I like it!

Lawrence Sail: But also there’s that note of *almost...not flippant...but almost of look, I can still do this*. ‘I could not see to see —’, the tone there lightens, doesn’t it?

Julia Copus: Yes.

Lawrence Sail: But it’s also the idea of the portions of her that are not assignable in the third verse. It’s all in a sense come home to roost, but how brilliant to end that...we have in our culture, a lot of examples of resonant and would-be resonant last words. And it plays into that kind of tradition, doesn’t it? ‘I could not see’ dot, dot, dot.

Julia Copus: Yes.

Lawrence Sail: You know, it’s wonderful and in an odd way, it doesn’t destroy what has become a continuum. It continues the idea of process, which I think is quite extraordinary.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: Well, I think that is a good place on which to end this first part of the podcast.

Thank you very much for talking to us about one of your favourite poems, ‘I Heard a Fly Buzz — When I Died —’ by Emily Dickinson.

My choice of Emily Dickinson poem is ‘I Could Die to Know’. And I chose it partly because there’s a fly in it. It’s quite a short poem, it’s twelve lines and I love the vividness of it, it feels like a slice of an actual day back in nineteenth-century New England. The speaker is sitting or lying in her room, wondering if her beloved is treading past the house at this very moment. And just before we listen to the poem, I just wanted to point out something about the rhythm, in that we talked about how regular a lot of Emily Dickinson’s metre is in her poems.

In this poem, the rhythms are completely chaotic. And I think they echo the disturbed thoughts of the speaker. So it’s very far from that steady iambic pulse of the first poem that we looked at and I think sounds even more than usually modern for that reason.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, I was going to say, I’m just very glad that you chose this poem because it forms a fascinating series of links and contrasts with the first poem. And like you’re just saying, it looks chaotic. And I was talking quite early on in the other poem about dashes, this has twenty-one dashes. And it does almost have a sense of the notebook about it.

Julia Copus: Here the dashes seem to...one of the things they do anyway is to suggest a kind of breathlessness, as the speaker is waiting. But now that you have read your poem with the dashes in, paying such careful attention to them, I’m going to have to try and do the same!

I could die — to know —
I could die — to know —
'Tis a trifling knowledge —

Writers Aloud

News-Boys salute the Door —
Carts — joggle by —
Morning's bold face — stares in the window —
Were but mine — the Charter of the least Fly —

Houses hunch the House
With their Brick Shoulders —
Coals — from a Rolling Load — rattle — how — near —
To the very Square — His foot is passing —
Possibly, this moment —
While I — dream — Here —

Amazing. So, 'News-Boys salute the Door —', line three, I was wondering whether they might actually be throwing the paper against the door as you see in American films?

Lawrence Sail: Well, interestingly enough, when that happens the arm actually comes up, to almost a salute position with the effort of throwing.

Julia Copus: Oh, yeah. So that probably is it. She's just dying to know this, what she calls 'trifling' bit of 'knowledge'. And then you get this frustration in line six where she says, 'Were but mine — the Charter of the least Fly —'.

Lawrence Sail: What do you think she means by that?

Julia Copus: I think what she means is that even the 'least Fly' has license to buzz around and to see freely and could buzz out of the house and see the beloved passing by if it wanted. So 'Were but mine —', *if only I had that flight.*

Lawrence Sail: Don't you think it's also about...the fly has no difficulty in defining its territory, it's in control. It's back to that idea of 'the Charter' of course, a covenant, I link it up with the lines in the first poem about what

Writers Aloud

would ‘be / Assignable,’ ‘I willed my Keepsakes —,’ because it’s that same idea of what is within my power and control and what isn’t.

Julia Copus: Yes, it does link up with ‘What portion of me be / Assignable.’ And then, second stanza, the very obvious alliteration: those repeated ‘ha’ sounds, almost onomatopoeic isn’t it? ‘Houses hunch the House.’ What a great line that is, it sounds so modern to me. ‘With their Brick Shoulders,’ so I see this really physical image of almost a sense that she feels overcrowded.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. It’s claustrophobic, it has a sense of enclosure doesn’t it? I suppose in point of view of sound, it goes rather well with ‘Between the Heaves of Storm,’ doesn’t it?

Julia Copus: Yes.

Lawrence Sail: And there’s that same sense of, just the gesture you were making as you spoke, with that gesture of the shoulders held in, the opposite to the openness of the ‘News-Boys,’ open-armed flinging the paper.

Julia Copus: And of course ‘Heaves,’ there’s that H sound again...

Lawrence Sail: Yes, quite.

Julia Copus: ...which she seems to use in those circumstances. There are lots of two syllables of equal weight: ‘bold face’ in line five and the next line ‘Charter of the least Fly —’. So we call these spondees, don’t we, in poetry, these two syllables of equal length. There are more, in line eight, ‘**Brick Shoulders**’; ‘**Brick Shoul...**’ and then line nine, ‘how — near —’. And they sound when you notice them like a footstep, ‘dom, dom’ and they lead up in line ten to ‘His foot,’ which really is a sort of emotional heart. And the ‘H’ there is capitalized, ‘His foot.’

Lawrence Sail: Yes. I hadn’t thought of that connection. What a lovely idea. And it’s convincing too. So instead of getting the whole person, we

Writers Aloud

simply get ‘His foot.’ And that in turn makes me think of touching the hem of his garment. As the sense of the whole being represented by that part, it’s almost as though the gaze of the person is humble and lowered and concentrates on the passage of the foot, which you’ve already said interestingly, was represented in the spondaic rhythms.

Julia Copus: The syntax is very broken up, isn’t it? But I suppose this, ‘His foot is passing —’ that phrase, is a conclusion. You could read a lot of the poem, the lines that come before that phrase, in parenthesis almost, so, ‘I could die — to know —’, ‘how — near’, ‘His foot is passing —’.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And rather as the first poem ran out with the almost, dot dot dot, the final dash of the onset of death. Here, there’s something not dissimilar going on. It’s creating the context within which this moment is framed.

Julia Copus: Yes. And I also like that ‘Possibly,’ and ‘this moment —’ are placed on the same line together.

Lawrence Sail: Yes.

Julia Copus: So ‘this moment —’ is so precise and absolute.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. Quite.

Julia Copus: But it’s paired with ‘Possibly.’ The ‘Here,’ the very last word, is capitalized. And I suppose we are supposed to read into that a contrast with, *not* ‘Here —’. In other words, *there*, where his foot is. Where she would like to be, where ‘the least fly —’ has license to go.

Lawrence Sail: And there’s something isn’t there too about her uncertainty or her hesitations played off against the...almost, you think, she’s slightly rude, ‘Morning’s bold face — stares in the window’.

Writers Aloud

Julia Copus: Yes. And maybe we can read into that as well a contrast with her own lack of boldness in not going outside.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And also a contrast with the difference between the ‘bold face’ staring in and her gaze that only just dare glimpse his foot.

Julia Copus: Yes, absolutely. That last line that you picked up on, it’s a slow line isn’t it, because of the monosyllables. It’s impossible to read that line quickly, especially if you take note of the dashes. So that really strikes up a contrast with the busy bustle of the outside world.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And of course, another interesting contrast between the two poems I think is, that this is in the present tense. And it makes all the difference and there’s so much cleverly aligned isn’t there, that what you described at the outset as chaotic, yes, of course, that’s how it reads. But at the same time it’s, in an impressionistic way, a very good evocation of things as they happen. This one looks at the interface between the outer world, and the implied interior position of the poem.

Julia Copus: The ‘Here — ’ of the last word.

Lawrence Sail: Exactly, ‘While I — dream — Here —’. The other poem looks at the interface between the interior room and death; it’s a very interesting contrast. They’re doing different things and it’s a tribute, I think, to the flexibility of her talent and the range of it, that they manifest themselves in such different ways.

Julia Copus: They do, the difference in the rhythm is very striking, isn’t it? A lot of the first words in each line are stressed, which is unusual because in the first poem – I was going to say *your* poem! – in the ‘I Heard a Fly Buzz —’ poem, you’ve got those typical de **da** de **da**, so the first syllable is not stressed: ‘I Heard’. And here we’ve got: ‘I’ is definitely stressed in the first line of this poem, ‘Tis News-boys’, ‘Carts’, I think it adds to that chaotic kind of offbeat sense of the poem. It’s a poem full of activity and

Writers Aloud

physicality: ‘the News-Boys’, the ‘Carts —’, the ‘Houses’, the lumps of ‘Coals — from a Rolling Load’. But also stillness.

Lawrence Sail: Yes.

Julia Copus: And the most still thing in the poem I suppose is in the end, the speaker: ‘While I — dream — Here’.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. In fact, I’m just looking at the...there are only two ‘I’s in the whole poem, one in the first line and one in the last.

Julia Copus: Yes.

Lawrence Sail: So it’s bookended, that first person, but largely away from it. Yes. It seems to be a wonderful example of that facet of her work, which uses rhythm and punctuation. Almost, as I mentioned earlier, as a musical score, actually she *conducts* the reader. You can’t get away from that. It’s extraordinary and it is very musical and it’s very definite. There’s no uncertainty about that in her work at all.

Julia Copus: No, her directions are very precise, aren’t they?

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And as you said, it particularly comes home to roost in the poise; the way in which the orchestra is brought down to a still hush at the end is quite extraordinarily accomplished.

Again, as you have noticed before, with the simplest of words, her vocabulary, and the sense of the everyday here is very straightforward, isn’t it? And then the relationship between the *here* of the poet’s position, and all that is observed in a quite apparently objective detached way from the outside.

Julia Copus: Yeah. The *there* of the rest of the poem. Interestingly, the auditory is experienced, isn’t it; you can hear all these things. A lot of the visual is imagined.

Writers Aloud

Lawrence Sail: Yes, quite.

Julia Copus: Which is...it's all a possibility, possibly at this moment. And it comes back again to that word, control, doesn't it; she has supreme control over it.

Lawrence Sail: Yes. And here, particularly when in a poem like this, where as you rightly say, it is, if not chaotic, then there's a lot of looseness, there's a lot going on, quite daringly. And yes, it does read much more like a contemporary poem from that point of view, but then the daring and the actually calling the orchestra back, of the ending, it's just wonderful!

Julia Copus: Yes. There's a kind of *rallentando* isn't there, a slowing down.

Lawrence Sail: Exactly, I knew there was a word for it! It is exactly that. You can imagine someone reading this, 'While I — dream — Here'. You can imagine the poet looking up at the audience very slowly and smiling slightly.

Julia Copus: But also that ellipsis at the end, that launching off into nothingness again.

Lawrence Sail: Yes, quite.

Julia Copus: Lawrence, I think I could talk to you about Emily Dickinson for at least an entire day. But we have to contain ourselves within the half hour or so of this podcast. So can I just say thank you so much.

Lawrence Sail: It's been *such* a pleasure, absolutely delightful. Thank you so much.

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Episode Outro: The theme music for this podcast was performed on trumpet by James Copus. Thanks for listening.

RLF Outro: And that concludes episode 394, which was recorded and

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produced by Julia Copus. Coming up in episode 395, Lucy Flannery speaks with Catherine O'Flynn about internal monologues, writing comedy, and doubt versus chutzpah. We hope you'll join us.

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