

Carol Frost: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

"Because I could not stop for Death" was first published in much-diminished form as "The Chariot"--changed in several important respects to take the sting out of the lines. For Emily Dickinson, death, God, and the eternities were regarded too conventionally, even lightly, by those around her, but her poetic stance and her themes--interpretations of mortal experience--were in turn too much for her first editors, her friends Thomas Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. The poems in the 1860 edition were trimmed down, when deemed necessary, to the Puritan dimensions that her sensibility exceeded. Sixty-five years later they were restored to the original, as written by her, and sewn into fascicles starting in 1858.

Interpreters of "The Chariot" are meant to believe that death's chariot (one that "swings low"?) comes to bring the dead one to everlasting life--that with death the immortal soul journeys to heaven. But for Dickinson the theological notion that Christ offers redemption was not a fait accompli, as her early letters prove?"give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but is hard for me to give up the world" (letter to Abiah Root, May 1849). Her understanding remained in flux even as her girlhood friends succumbed to revival and scripture, and even as she felt strong pricks of conscience "I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so I slink away, and pause, and ponder ... and do work without knowing why--not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven--and I ask what this message means that they ask for so eagerly" (letter to Abiah Root, 1850).

Death, and what comes thereafter, is the heart of the matter for religious faith, which offers reassurances against death's impersonal and sudden power. At the heart of this heart is fear. That the fear could be washed away simply by baptism, Dickinson, it seems, couldn't entirely believe or accept. She chose instead to live with and admit death's power and to express the fear, committing herself to "My second Rank," after having "ceded": "I've stopped being Theirs-- / The name They dropped upon my face / With water, in the country church / is finished using, now, / And They can put it with my Dolls, / My childhood, and the string of spools, / I've finished threading?too--."

On the surface, the first lines of "Because I could not stop for Death" appear to invoke orthodox reassurance against the fear of death. Death is portrayed as sensitive to the ordinary busy life of mortals--too occupied with life to stop--when he "kindly" stops and invites her for a carriage ride. In reality, the lines offer the first of several ironic reversals of what Dickinson suggests might be but isn't. If the conditional phrase seems to suggest that the dead one has rights and options in the matter--a choice of when to die--the main clause is the reminder of death's absolute nature. He stops, and that's that. The sentence points to the very human capacity to fool ourselves when we are afraid. Faced with the large unknown, we pretend it is manageable. Because it is unacceptable in its brute form, we make it governable. We whistle in the dark. That death, "kindly" and civil, is really in charge is pointed out in lines 2 and 5. He is in the driver's seat, and he drives as slowly as he likes.

There is a third occupant in the carriage, Immortality--shadowy, and if not a person, a condition to be desired. Immortality is consoling and recognizable, what one hopes will come with death. With Immortality as a companion, the speaker can accede to the trip in death's carriage; it becomes a leisurely afternoon drive--a gentleman taking a lady and her friend (a chaperone?) for a ride in the country. "And Immortality," on a line by itself, helps to emphasize the importance of the presence of the other passenger. Without Immortality present, might not the speaker have been afraid? Perhaps she'd have refused to go along to the otherwise undisclosed destination.

Death by itself in Dickinson's other poems and letters is not so gentle or refined. In "He fumbles at your Soul," for instance, death (or deity) "scalps your naked soul" while "The Universe is still." If "The Maker's cordial visage" (1718) provides something hopeful for the drowning man (who drowns), death produces a "Stiff stare" (1624), a "Forehead" that "copied stone," and "congealed" eyes. In her letters death is ever present:

I can't stay any longer in a world of death. Austin is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week--our man, Dick, lost a little girl through scarlet fever. I thought perhaps you were dead, and not knowing the sexton's address, interrogate the daisies. Ah! Dainty--dainty Death! Ah! democratic death--grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden,--then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child. Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive? The woods are dead. Is Mrs. H. alive? Annie and Katie--are they below, or received to nowhere? (letter to the Hollands, 1858)

Who would go along willingly with death, forgetting all terror, unless a promise were offered? Dickinson offers the reader Immortality, as the Congregational ministers once offered it to her in their sermons. Is it a ruse? The reader, like a member of the congregation, will have to wait to see.

In the second stanza Death and the speaker ride along without concern for time. Her "labor" and her "leisure," are done, and she is content to be in the carriage, as if now there were no other concern but death's luxury. The word labor in line 7 recalls the good works to be done for God's world by true Christians--works now no longer necessary. Dickinson means for us to regard the word ironically. In lines 9 and 10 the poem reads, "We passed the School, where Children strove / At Recess in the Ring." In the use of strove to indicate labor, we are meant to understand something more than, and including, "play," for isn't that what children do at recess, after their lessons and schoolwork? Strove emphasizes the children's energy, while the speaker, her life over, sits passively in the carriage; but it is also a reminder that as Christians children are meant to start early to labor for their salvation. Should they be allowed simply to play? In the 1860 version of the poem the lines read, "We passed the school where children played, / Their lessons scarcely done." Why did Dickinson write "strove"? Was it because she knew from experience that time pressed, even upon children, and death often came early? "How swiftly summer has fled and what report has it home to heaven of misspent time & wasted hours. Eternity only will answer. The ceaseless flight of the seasons is to me a very solemn thought, & yet Why do we not strive to make better improvement of them?" Dickinson wrote to her friend Abiah Root when she was fifteen and a student at Amherst Academy in September 1846. As much in danger from death as adults and thus in need for early belief in the trinity, children strove.

The word choice seems clearly ironic, with Dickinson playing reality against the romantic view of childhood and death, where one's salvation is so little in danger that a schoolyard is solely for play ("the school where children played," "The Chariot"). The speaker enters the carriage as a believer, immortal soul intact, but the adult Dickinson was not such a one in the conventional sense. The poem is informed ironically with theology; it is the inexorable law of time's direction that the little narrative uncovers: the carriage seems to be going where God's chariots are supposed to go, but it ends up in the graveyard.

I had been perplexed by the line, "We passed the Setting Sun," turning over all its possible implications and a little in awe of Dickinson's ability to make the situation of the poem seem both commonplace and ominously strange. Perhaps the carriage had turned heavenward after all and made a celestial pass by the sun. But wasn't the sun setting, which meant that the point of perception was on earth? How could one pass the sun? Surely the line was not there only to set up the next line's reminder of nature's significant power over us, "Or rather-- He passed Us." Then I remembered a ride in the country late one night in my husband's big old Buick. The moon was full and always a little ahead and to the right of us as we traveled east on Route 7; but when the road curved north, the moon seemed to fall behind. We passed it in a sense. The poet's essential task isn't to hold up a mirror to nature, but even when Dickinson is altering reality--bringing the dead to life, condensing and stretching time and space--her oblique language contains the necessary details to make her readers believe that what they've read has happened.

The third stanza takes note of the daily routine of the life the speaker is passing from, starting with children at recess and ending with the setting sun. The day seems to have gone down quickly, in part because of the dual suggestion of both a day's cycle and the cycle of the seasons. How clever the mixture of details that suggest both beginnings and decline, youth and ripeness. Time speeds, in part because of the insistent echo, in the short lines, of the verb ("passed") as the carriage travels through realms of living--human, animated nature, and nature becoming passive--the "setting sun," which seems even more passive in contrast with the striving children.

The imaginative reach in this stanza is for me most evident in the phrase "Gazing Grain," with all its implications about what it is like to be alive and dead at the same time--the condition of the speaker throughout the poem. The phrase emphasizes the speaker's passivity, assigning the human task to nature, animating the grain. By its placid and constant presence, it seems to stare. But it is the speaker, who has gone with death, who takes note of this. She watches from the carriage as mortality slips by--though with death, and passive, she still registers sensory details. She sees, and as long as she does, she still is. This sense of an unwillingness to relinquish the world and the self--of being--carries throughout Dickinson's work; and if death offers, as here, immortality, immortality had better provide an experience like the one life offers: it had better let her see. In a somber mood Dickinson writes this in a letter to Abiah Root: "I cannot realize that friends I have seen pass from my sight ... will not walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor can I realize that when I again meet them it will be in another & far different world from this." It is interesting to me that in her depictions of this "different world," the speaker is by herself, as in the poem under consideration. She is alone to experience death and the nature of posthumous grace. Is this not what frightens one likely to die?

In the same letter Dickinson asks, "Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you? I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me.... To think that we must forever live and never cease to be." As the sun sets, darkness and a chill set in in stanza four, the stanza that was entirely removed in "The Chariot," perhaps because it was too grim, or because the editors didn't understand it. Death has been kind and civil, but he drives the carriage toward the dark and cold of the grave. The speaker feels the chill, for she is flimsily dressed with a scarf not made of fur or wool but of "Tule" (a thin, fine machine-made net), and in "Gossamer." Gossamer brings to mind the light gauze used for veils (Is she to be Christ's bride?) and the cobwebs I've walked through in the grass fields and scrub in September and October. The details are consistent with death: autumn and winter are death's perennial seasons. The subtle emphasis in the poem on a growing cold mimics both the process of dying, as if the dead one were dying even more, and our earthly answer to the mystery that separates the warm living from the cold dead. Cold (and dark) also represents our fear, as in "And zero at the bone," from "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass."

The supernatural journey ends in the graveyard, where the carriage pauses by a "House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground," with its cornice "in the Ground." By rhyming ground with itself Dickinson emphasizes the carriage's destination and the body's disposition. For her even death is a physical experience--the dead experiencing the cool damp air after the sunset and hard on that arriving at the tomb where one imagines a similar quality of air. In the Todd/Higginson version of the poem the rhyme is altered to ground/mound, softening Dickinson's thematic intentions and nudging the verses toward conventionality, as indeed the editors tried to do throughout.

What a shock it was to first open the first edition of *Poems* by Emily Dickinson after having known the poem first in the version published in 1955. How could you? I heard myself think. When ever was Dickinson's emphasis on the peace that passeth all understanding? How could they not see that hers was no romantic sensibility but one capable of writing about death as it is? The carriage isn't a chariot, it's a hearse. How could they change the extraordinary rhyme? The ground/ground rhyme had always been a favorite of mine, unusual, I thought, in poetry, though not unheard of, and pretty unusual in Dickinson. The *Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson* (S. P. Rosenbaum, Cornell University Press, 1964) shows how rarely she used a same-word rhyme. Though death is an important word and concept in Dickinson, the rhyme never appears. Out-of-stanza both die and dead are rhymed with each other once. Other such rhymes occur with the words passion, noon, dark, day, green, sky, night, rose, soul, grave, and god (once in-stanza and four times out-of-stanza). Excluding refrains, then, the in- and out-of-stanza same-word rhymes occur infrequently except for the words me, which rhymes with itself in fifty-three of her poems, and be, rhyming with itself sixteen times.

Having given up her identity as a conventional Christian, continuing to wonder about the nature of those things past ordinary understanding, trusting her eye and things face-to-face over the vision of the true believer, thinking death certain and God remote, by turns defiant, wry, perplexed, wouldn't she consider the question of how to "be" and doesn't she find its expression and emphasis in many of her poems? "Because I could not stop for Death" certainly addresses itself to the question of being by describing the state of being alive and dead at the same time. She doesn't explain how the dead live, except to give us glimpses of the perceptions the living have, ending with the partial, remembered age of the "Horses' Heads" facing eternity.

The speaker is in the cemetery, left to wonder at her progress from the moment of her first encounter with Death, with his promise of immortality, to her present situation. Immortality has changed into Eternity--an uncomfortable change, one would think, from everlasting life to a long time of waiting for redemption. The final stanza is written in the present tense, which emphasizes the hereness and withness (the existence) of the speaker after death and also suggests that the implied questions cannot be answered. What is Immortality like? We don't know--he has disappeared. Death and his carriage also recede. Only snatches of memory are left and a little narrative in stanza three representing life and also death. Time has elapsed quickly and been agonizingly slow, a psychological truth that is recognizably real--when people are excited, bored, fearful--but things for the speaker are much the same. Why hasn't redemption come? The questions, Dickinson implies, persist. People will always wonder what heaven is like and live with the hope that immortality will be granted. And until the unknown bliss is achieved, then, Dickinson suggests, the world of grain and carriage rides and, yes, graveyards, is all there is. "Instead of getting to Heaven, at last," Dickinson says in an earlier poem (#324), a person can be "going, all along." And in another wording of a similar sentiment, Dickinson says in a letter to Mrs. J. Holland in 1856, "if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I had seen--I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous."

Emily Dickinson's poems are personal and, however strange the experience she presents, inviting. If they are strange, they are no less real for that, the strangeness relating less to her oblique language (which can be read, even in the difficult stanzas) than to her refusal to put down the experience as if it had been experienced the same way by everyone, or as if there were conventions for feeling and knowing. Her untrammelled imagination and intellect require

an individual reading and reader. The good reader intuits this and feels welcomed. Higginson and Todd, like other of her acquaintances, her family, and some of her literary heirs, felt the poems alien to what they knew, having predilections toward a style of versification and thematic locus that weren't sufficiently present in Dickinson's poems for them to understand the lines, and so they changed entire verses, radically altering the poems. They were unwilling to accept the elite place among writers she chose for herself as early as 1855 or 1856 and managed to reach a scant five or six years later, by then "Erect / With Will to Choose, or to reject" (508). Critics today, it often seems, are guilty of similar dismantlings, and for the same reasons: putting forth central meanings that they find more agreeable or more theirs, and being unable to accept the authorial ambition to write not "adequate" (508) but great poems. They are too willing to discard the individual reach toward meaning in individual poems and to replace it with what society, they think, ought to be aware of--truths they deem more significant or revealing than what the writer intended. And so with all the best intentions (one hopes) critics can do a disservice to the reading public. Any author's death, corporeal and real or greatly exaggerated, makes that possible. (Higginson would not publish Dickinson's poems in the Atlantic Monthly during her lifetime.) Authors of the caliber of Emily Dickinson don't stay dead when there are good readers to read the poems as they were written. In "Because I could not stop for Death," perhaps her finest poem on the theme of what lies beyond death, both in cosmic terms and in the feeling of those bound to die, she presents us with the strangeness of such a condition. There are no lectures and no overt theological speculations, though the experience is every way conditioned by the abstract: motion and stasis; everlasting life; youth; nature; time; immortality; what it is to be. The poem allows us to feel our own discomfort at not fully knowing, despite what we might surmise, and to experience fears and wonders about time's evanescence and the mystery of death. We yearn for immortality, so he accompanies one of us, the one invited into death's carriage. We feel the yearning and the fear as Dickinson must once have, their expression being so palpable, and while we do the poem belongs to us, common readers.

Carol Frost has published two chapbooks and six full-length collections of poems, including *Pure* (1994) and *Venus & Don Juan* (1996) from Northwestern University Press, which will print *Love & Scorn*, her new and collected poems, in the spring 2000. She has taught at Washington University, Syracuse University, and for writers' conferences at Bread Loaf and Sewanee. She teaches at Hartwick College, where she directs the Catskill Poetry Workshop.

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