

"The Stillness in the Air": Six Poems of Emily Dickinson

For mezzo soprano and piano

Lawrence Kramer

The underlying themes of "The Stillness in the Air" (1985, 2011, 2016) are mortality and rapture--two seemingly contrary ideas that Emily Dickinson's poetry repeatedly brings together. "There's A Certain Slant of Light" dwells on uneasy, half-conscious intimations of mortality that press ever more insistently for conscious recognition; pauses and hesitations in the vocal line register the difficulty of the experience. "Apparently with no Surprise" is a pungent refusal to accept props and bromides; the very brief song is like a grim scherzo. "I Heard a Fly Buzz" is about the experience of dying; its music is the darkest in the cycle. The vocal hesitations of the first song return here at the close in heightened form. "As Imperceptibly as Grief" is an elegy of sorts, but one more wistful than mournful; the music is more praise than lament. But its grip is tenuous; at a crucial point, led by the obbligato, lament breaks through and is not necessarily appeased. "Of Bronze and Blaze" contemplates mortality from the perspective of an observer both elevated and dwarfed by the scale of the cosmos as embodied in the aurora borealis. Picking up on the gentler aspect of "Imperceptibly," "These are the Days when Birds Come Back" tries to represent the awareness of mortality as a kind of uncanny elation. The poem represents the secular appreciation of passing things as a sacrament. The music, piano throughout, responds with the most liquid vocal line of the cycle.

Dickinson might be said to have been preoccupied by the question: What is relationship between death and being in paradise? In her religious tradition, and especially that of the Protestant hymnody that supplies part of the imagery and cadence of her poetry, the answer of course is that the one, for the faithful, is the portal of the other. This is something Dickinson could never really bring herself to believe. Her poetry looked for alternatives. It is this search that forms the central idea of the cycle.

My cycle reflects the conviction that Dickinson's voices of reconciliation and resistance are always entangled but never quite at one. The singing voice is the one seeking reconciliation, but it still has bite--its antagonist is mortality, after all; the piano part forms the other voice, the voice of Dickinson in her otherness, absoluteness, and potential violence. She and it: the *it* in her, the *she* in *it*. This more-than-human voice of the instrument may be inside or outside the frame of the singing voice, or it may intrude or escape violently--and it does all of these. The cycle, musically speaking, is ultimately about these interactions. One key point about them is the solitude that tempts both voices, voices that sometimes barely touch and sometimes leave one another alone. The cycle as a whole claims to integrate the two in the end, but the claim should not be taken too literally

Duration: 16-17 minutes. The poems as printed and set here are the public domain versions, lightly altered in a few spots (in the spirit, but not the word--or punctuation!-- of the later copyrighted editions) to undo the attempt by Dickinson's first editors to make her texts more conventional.

1. There's a certain slant of light,  
[Of] winter afternoons,  
That oppresses, like the weight  
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference  
Where the meanings are.

None may teach it [ever],  
'Tis the seal, despair, --  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the air.

When it comes, the landscape listens,  
Shadows hold their breath;  
When it goes, 'tis like the distance  
On the look of death.

2. Apparently with no surprise  
To any happy flower,  
The frost beheads it at its play  
In accidental power.  
The blond assassin passes on,  
The sun proceeds unmoved  
To measure off another day  
For an approving God.

4. As imperceptibly as grief  
The summer lapsed away, --  
Too imperceptible, at last,  
To seem like perfidy.

A quietness distilled,  
As twilight long begun,  
Or Nature, spending with herself  
Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,  
The morning foreign shone, --  
A courteous, yet harrowing grace,  
As guest who would be gone.

And thus, without a wing,  
Or service of a keel,  
Our summer made her light escape  
Into the beautiful.

6. These are the days when birds come back,  
A very few, a bird or two,  
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume  
The old, old sophistries of June,--  
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh, fraud that cannot cheat the bee,  
Almost thy plausibility  
Induces my belief,

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear,  
And softly through the altered air  
Hurries a timid leaf!

Oh, sacrament of summer days,  
Oh, last communion in the haze,  
Permit a child to join,

Thy sacred emblems to partake,  
Thy consecrated bread to take,  
And [thy] immortal wine.

3. I heard a fly buzz when I died;  
The stillness [of the room]  
Was like the stillness in the air  
Between the heavens of storm.

The eyes beside had wrung them dry,  
And breaths were gathering [sore]  
For that last onset, when the king  
Be witnessed [at the door].

I willed my keepsakes, signed away  
What portion of me  
[Were] assignable, -- and then, [and then]  
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.

5. Of bronze and blaze  
The north, to-night!  
So adequate its forms,  
So preconcerted with itself,  
So distant to alarms, --  
An unconcern so sovereign  
To universe, or me,  
[Besmeared] my simple spirit  
With [streaks] of majesty,  
Till I take vaster attitudes,  
And strut upon my stem,  
Disdaining men and oxygen,  
For arrogance of them.  
My splendors are menagerie;  
But their competeless show  
Will entertain the centuries  
When I am, long ago,  
An island in dishonored grass,  
Whom none but [insects] know.

# 1. "There's a Certain Slant of Light"

Lawrence Kramer

♩ = c. 72

Voice

Piano

*pp*

*una corda*

*p*

6

6

*p*

There's a cer - tain slant of light, of

*mp*

*p* *tré corde*

8vb

11

11

*pp*

win - ter af - ter - noons, that op-pres - ses like the

*pp*

3

15 *p*

heft of. of ca - the - dral tunes

19 *p* *mp*

Hea - ven-ly hurt it gives us,

23 *mp*

we can find no scar, but in - ter - nal

8<sup>vb</sup>

6

26 *mf* *mp* *p*

differ - ence, \_\_\_\_\_ where the mean-ings are. \_\_\_\_\_

26 *mf* *mp* *fp* *8vb*

30 *mp*

None may

30 *mp*

33 *cresc. poco a poco* *f*

teach it e - ver, \_\_\_\_\_ 'tis the seal des - pair, \_\_\_\_\_

33 *cresc. poco a poco* *f* *cresc.*

36 *p*  
an im-per - i - al af - flic - tion sent us

39 *pp* *p*  
of the air. When it comes the

42  
land-scape lis - tens, sha - dows hold their breath.

45 *rit.* *a tempo*

When it goes 'tis like the dis - tance on the look of death.

45 *8va*

49

49

2. "Apparently with No Surprise"

♩ = c. 120

*rit.*

Musical score for the first system. The vocal line is in 3/4 time. The piano accompaniment is in 3/4 time. Dynamics include *mp*, *mf*, and *f*. A triplet of eighth notes is present. The piece concludes with a *rit.* marking.

5 ♩ = c. 94

♩ = c. 120

*p*

Musical score for the second system. The vocal line is in 4/4 time. The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time. Dynamics include *p* and *f*. The tempo is marked as *c. 94* and *c. 120*. The system concludes with a fermata and the letter 'A-'.

8

*mf*

Musical score for the third system. The vocal line has lyrics: "par-rent-ly with no sur - prise to a - ny hap - py flow - er,". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time. Dynamics include *mf* and *f*. A triplet of eighth notes is present.

12 *p* ♩ = c. 94 *p*

the frost be - heads it at its play in ac - ci -

16 *f* *p*

den - tal pow - er. The

18 ♩ = c. 120 *f*

blond as - sas - sin - pas - ses on The sun pro - ceeds

♩ = c. 94

22 *p*

un-moved, the sun pro - ceeds

*p* *f* *p*

25 *pp*<sub>3</sub>

un - moved to mea - sure off a - no - ther day for an ap -

29

prov - ing God.

## 3. "I Heard a Fly Buzz"

$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 72$

*p*

I heard a fly buzz \_\_\_\_\_

*fp*

5

when I died. \_\_\_\_\_ The still - ness of the room

5

*p*

9

*cresc. poco a poco*

\_\_\_\_\_ was like the still - ness in the air \_\_\_\_\_

9

*cresc. poco a poco*

8va - - - -

8vb - - - -

12 *f* *ff*

be - tween the heaves, the heaves of

15 storm.

15 *f* *mp* *p*

18 *pp*

The eyes a - round had wrung them

18 *poco cresc.* *pp*

21 *p* *cresc.* *p*

dry, and breaths \_\_\_\_\_ were ga-ther-ing sore for that last

21 *p* *cresc.* *p*

24 *rit.* *a tempo*

on - set when the king \_\_\_\_\_ be wit-nessed at the door. \_\_\_\_\_

24 *rit.* *a tempo*

8vb

27 *p*

I

27 *mf*

30 *accel.* *f*

willed my keep-sakes, signed a - way \_\_\_\_\_ what por-tion of me were as-sign - a -

30 *accel.* *p* *f* *fp*

33 *a tempo* *p*

ble. \_\_\_\_\_ And then, and then there

33 *a tempo* *f* *fp* *f* *ff*

37 *mf* *sprechstimme* *p*

in - ter-posed a fly \_\_\_\_\_ with blue un-cer-tain stumb-ling buzz \_\_\_\_\_ be-tween the

37 *f* *p* *8va* *8vb*

41

light and me. And then the win-dows failed,

45

and then the win-dows failed, and then I could

48 *rit.*

not see to see.

4. "As Imperceptibly as Grief"

*p*

$\text{♩} = 84$

As

6

im - per - cept - ib - ly — as grief our sum - mer lapsed a -

10

way, — too — im - per - cept - i - bly at last

10 *sva*

14 8<sup>va</sup> a piacere -----

to seem like per-fi-dy. A qui - et-ness dis-

18 *p*

tilled as twi - light long be - gun,

22

or Na - ture spend - ing

25

with her - self \_\_\_\_\_ se - quest \_\_\_\_\_ ered af - ter - noon.

28 *mp* ♩ = c. 94 *mf*

The dusk \_\_\_\_\_ drew ear-li-er in, \_\_\_\_\_ the morn - ing

32 *accel.* ♩ = 100 *p* *mp*

for - eign shone, a cour-te-ous yet har-row-ing grace, as guest who would be

35 *f* *p* *mf* *ff*

gone, a cour-te-ous — yet har - ow-ing grace, as guest

35 *f* *p* *mf* *ff*

38 *f* *ff* *rit.*

who would be gone.

38 *f* *ff* *mf* *p*

42  $\text{♩} = c. 94$  *rit.* *pp*  $\text{♩} = 84$  *p*

And thus with-out a wing, or

42 *pp* *p*

46

ser - vice of a keel, our sum - mer \_\_\_\_\_ made her

*p*

3

50

*rit.* ♩ = c. 72

light es - cape in - to the beau - - - ti -

3

8va

54

*rit.*

ful. \_\_\_\_\_

8va

5. Of Bronze and Blaze

♩ = 52

The first system of the musical score is in 4/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a rest for four measures, followed by the lyrics "Of bronze and". The piano accompaniment consists of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The bass line includes a "Sostenuto Pedal" marking and a "ff" (fortissimo) dynamic. The piano part includes a "p" (piano) dynamic and a crescendo/decrescendo hairpin.

Of bronze and

*p*

*ff*

*Sostenuto Pedal*

The second system of the musical score continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics "blaze the north, to - night! So". The piano accompaniment features a variety of dynamics including "cresc.", "f" (forte), "ff", "mf" (mezzo-forte), and "p". The bass line continues with the "Sostenuto Pedal" and "ff" dynamics. The piano part includes a "p" dynamic and a hairpin.

blaze the north, to - night! So

*cresc.* *f* *p*

*ff* *mf* *p*

*ff* *ff* *ff*

11

ad-e-quate its forms, so pre-con-cert-ed \_\_\_\_\_ with it - self, so dis -

11 8

*ff* *ff* *p* *ff* *ff*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 11 through 14. The vocal line (top staff) begins with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 11, followed by a quarter note, then a triplet of eighth notes in measure 12, and continues with a half note in measure 13 and a quarter note in measure 14. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) features a bass line with a long note in measure 11, a half note in measure 12, and a long note in measure 13. The right hand of the piano has chords in measures 12 and 13, with a dynamic marking of *p* in measure 13. Dynamic markings of *ff* are present in measures 11, 12, 13, and 14.

15

- tant from a - larms, \_\_\_\_\_

$\text{♩} = 63$  *rit.*

15 8

*ff* *p* *ff* *p* *rit.*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 15 through 18. The vocal line (top staff) has a half note in measure 15, followed by a quarter note in measure 16, and rests in measures 17 and 18. The piano accompaniment (middle and bottom staves) has chords in measure 15 with a dynamic marking of *p*, and a half note in measure 16 with a dynamic marking of *ff*. In measure 17, the right hand has a triplet of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *p*, and the left hand has a half note. In measure 18, the right hand has a triplet of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *rit.* and a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 63$ . Dynamic markings of *ff* are present in measures 15, 16, and 17.

18 *a tempo*

an un - con - cern so sov - ereign to

18 *a tempo*

18

8

21 *p*

un - i-verse, or me, be - smears my sim - ple spi - rit

21 *p*

21 *cresc.*

21 *ff*

8

*ped.*

25  $\text{♩} = 52$

with streaks of ma - jes - ty. Till I take

25 8

*p*

25 8

\*

28 *mp* *cresc.*

vast - er at - ti - tudes — and strut u - pon my stem, dis - dain - ing

28 8

*mp* *cresc.*

28 8

30 *f* *f*

men and ox - y - gen, — for ar - - - ro-gance of

30 8

*cresc.*

30 *f*

33 *pp* *p* *3*

them. My - splend - ors are me - na-ge-rie, — but

33 8

*p* *pp* *p*

33 *p* *pp* *p*

38 *rit. cresc.* *a tempo* ***f*** *p* **3**

their com-pete - less show will en-ter-tain the cen-tu-ries

38 8

*rit.* *a tempo* ***ff*** *p*

38 8

43 *pp* **3**

— when I am, long a - go, an is - land in dis-

43 8

*p* *pp*

43 8

*mp* *p*

48

hon - ored grass whom none but in - sects know.

48 8

*pp* *pp* *pp*

*p* *p* *p*

48

8



9

These — are the days when

*Sost. Ped.* *Sost. Ped.*

Detailed description: This block contains the first system of the musical score, measures 9 through 11. It features a vocal line in a treble clef and a piano accompaniment in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with a whole rest in measure 9, followed by a quarter rest in measure 10, and then the lyrics 'These — are the days when' starting in measure 11. The piano accompaniment consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Pedal markings 'Sost. Ped.' are placed below the piano part in measures 10 and 11.

12

skies — re - sume, — the old, — old soph-istries — of June, —

Detailed description: This block contains the second system of the musical score, measures 12 through 14. The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'skies — re - sume, — the old, — old soph-istries — of June, —'. The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern as the previous system. The key signature and time signature remain the same.

15

— a blue and gold mis - take.

Detailed description: This block contains the third system of the musical score, measures 15 through 17. The vocal line concludes with the lyrics '— a blue and gold mis - take.' The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern. The key signature and time signature remain the same. A fermata is placed over the final note of the vocal line in measure 17.

18  $\text{♩} = \text{c. } 72$

Oh fraud that can-not cheat the bee,

*pp*

*Sost. Ped.*

20

al - most thy plau - si - bi - li - ty in -

*p*

*Sost. Ped.*

22

du - ces my be - lief,

*poco cresc.*

24

*8va* til ranks of seeds their wit - ness bear, \_\_\_\_\_ and  
*loco*

*mp*

26

soft - ly through the al - tered air \_\_\_\_\_ hur - ries a ti - mid leaf.

*p*

30

*rit.* *a tempo*

Oh sa - cra - ment of

*espress.*

33

sum - mer days, oh last com - mun - ion in the haze,

33

*cresc.*

37

per - mit a child to join, thy sa - cred em - blems to par - take,

37

*poco riten.*

40

thy con - se - crat - ed bread to take, and

40

*piu riten.* *piu riten.*

43

thy im - mor - tal wine.

43