

Our Life in Poetry: Emily Dickinson

January 8, 2008

7:00 p.m.

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy
Braziller: Michael Braziller
Quinn: Alice Quinn
A: Speaker from audience

Levy: I'm Francis Levy. I'm Co-Director of the Philoctetes Center. Ed Nersessian is the other Co-Director. Welcome to Our Life in Poetry: Emily Dickinson. Now I'm very proud to introduce Mike Braziller, who is the president and publisher of Persea Books. Persea publishes literary and educational fiction and poetry. Mike is also a longtime friend of mine. Mike will introduce our distinguished panelist and host our discussion this evening.

Braziller: Thanks, Frank. Tonight we'll be talking about the life and poetry of Emily Dickinson. We're very lucky to have Alice with us. Alice Quinn is Executive Director of the Poetry Society of America. She was poetry editor at the publishing firm Alfred A. Knopf (1976-86) and poetry editor at *The New Yorker* (1987-2007). She is the editor of *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments by Elizabeth Bishop*. She is also a Professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts, where she has taught since 1989. Welcome, Alice.

Quinn: Thank you. We're also friends. Most people who love Emily Dickinson's poetry become almost fanatical about it, so I'm sure there will be a little bit of repetition for all of you who know her story, because it's such a big part of the legend of Emily Dickinson. But we thought we would take fifteen minutes to describe a little bit of the family background and pivotal aspects of crucial issues in her life, issues of renunciation largely, willful or no.

There's a wonderful essay by Richard Wilbur called "Sumptuous Destitution," in which he argues that the three things that mattered to her most she had to renounce. She herself referred to renunciation as the most piercing virtue. And that would be the renunciation of God when she was a young girl.

It was a time of incredible revivals in her little country town of Amherst. From 1840, when she was ten years old, to 1862, when she was thirty-two years old, there were eight revivals. Everyone in her family surrendered. This was a moment when Transcendentalism was being countered by the old Calvinist world which was dying down and everybody was into soul-searching and confession and redemption, and all of her friends were dropping like flies. She wrote to a young friend of hers, "I alone stand in rebellion." There's a wonderful letter when she was sixteen years old that she wrote to a friend: "I am not unconcerned upon the all-important subject to which you have so frequently and so affectionately called my attention in your letters, but I feel that I have not yet made my peace with God. I'm still a stranger to the delightful emotions which fill your heart. I've perfect confidence in God and His promises, and yet, I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I don't feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die." She was writing to her friends a lot of the time: "Will

you tell me what it is you *feel*? I can't feel that." So a big aspect of her early life was that her father, her sister, and her brother all converted, and she did not.

Another huge aspect of her life is the fanatical temperament of the Dickinson household. Her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, was a salutarian at Dartmouth, one of the founders of Amherst College. He was so intent on establishing that college that something upwards of twelve or fourteen of the Irishmen who were physically building the college lived in the Dickinson household and bankrupted him. He ended up having to give up the old homestead and he became a caretaker at a seminary in Iowa or Ohio—forgive me for not remembering that. His son, Edward Squire Dickinson, a great lawyer who became the treasurer of Amherst College, made it his young life's business to get back that family house, the homestead.

Emily wrote of her father that "his heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists." He did give her a dog, Carlo. He had a wonderful library. She said, "Father has wonderful books but he begs me not to read them." Her mother was supposedly fairly hypochondriacal and later on in life, as she was dying, Emily wrote: "We were not affectionate mother and children, but as minds in the same earth meet by tunneling, when she became our child, the affection came." Her letters are absolutely astounding. Really, really wonderful letters.

The other big aspect of her life, of course—her brother thought it was all nonsense—was this whole thing about Emily's withdrawal. By the age of twenty, she was writing to a friend: "I don't leave the house unless emergency takes me by the hand." She found life fairly shallow, really, and the way people approached life fairly shallow. There's a lot of contemporary testimony to that by Susan Gilbert, whom she loved very deeply, by Austin himself, by Mabel Loomis Todd, who ended up editing her poetry.

One of my favorite things that she wrote is, "In all the circumference of expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed: 'I was afraid, and hid myself.'" There's also another wonderful thing: she said that she felt "most people talked of hallowed things and embarrassed my dog." Then there's a lot of speculation—we'll read tonight many poems that touch on the subject of love and physical ecstasy. Her brother maintained that this girl of ebullient spirits in childhood and who was remarkably brilliant and who wrote wonderful essays, and was notable for being socially delightful—Austin made it clear to Mabel Loomis Todd that Emily Dickinson had a few love affairs and then she just withdrew very naturally. He thought the whole legend about her, and there was a legend—in her lifetime she was referred to as "the myth of Amherst"—was just nonsense.

Braziller: She went away to school, as I remember. Didn't she try to go to college and then return home? In other words, didn't she venture out?

Quinn: She went to Mt. Holyoke Academy.

Braziller: She ventured out for a few years and then, at twenty-three, I think she was quoted as saying, "I do not go from home." Then the word was that she rarely left the front yard since then.

Quinn: Right.

Braziller: There was a story that she lived upstairs and she had a long string that she filled with candy and she let it down from the window so that the children could come and get the candy. This was one method of contact.

Quinn: Yes, she loved children, apparently, and allowed them to see her. It is true that she didn't allow many people to see her. To fast forward quickly to the story of the publication of her poems, probably most of you know that there is something like, I think it's 1,750 poems, and it was her sister Vinnie that determined that she was going to get them published. One of the early ardent relationships in Dickinson's life was that of her love for Susan Gilbert. Some of the poems touch upon that.

Braziller: These poems were not published in her life, right? She published five or six in her life.

Quinn: Seven poems.

Braziller: She was against publication. She thought it was a vulgarity or something.

Quinn: "The auction of the mind of man." But remember that all the poems that were published were altered, so she felt they had been trifled with and that upset her.

Braziller: As I understand it, she sent hundreds out to friends. She didn't publish them, but if you were somebody that she was involved with or interested in, she would send them dozens and dozens of poems. I'm sure they didn't know what to make of a lot of them.

Quinn: Susan probably had 300 sent to her. She made that fatal mistake of introducing her brother to her best friend, and they married. They lived next door, in a place called "The Evergreens." Susan, who was an orphan girl, had a twin sister—I think she was a twin. The letters to Susan when she moves away from Amherst and Baltimore are incredibly moving. There are many dramatic points in their relationship, when Dickinson will say, "We've reached a certain pass, Susan, and I'm of this nature, so just go on up the hill and go on singing and I'll be on my own. I can handle it." But it was an early profound relationship for her.

Braziller: Did anyone realize that there were almost 1,800 when her sister and Mabel Todd, is it? When they went and discovered—was it a shock?

Quinn: Vinnie was the one that found the poems. There were about 400 that were arranged in what we all know are the little fascicles that she sewed together in groups of four. In fact, Harvard published a book that wasn't too expensive—I think it was \$200. I have it—of all the reproductions of the poems in fascicles, so you can actually study the way she put those packets of poems together, and that's a whole way of studying her poetry.

Braziller: You would be studying them as sequence.

Quinn: Thematically. Why did she put them together, and did it matter to her that one was from 1862, a year of tremendous trauma in which she produced 366 poems. Did she put one in from '62 with one from '74—why did she put them together? It's fun to think about.

The others were sent, as you say, to Susan Gilbert, to the Hollands, Dr. Holland and his wife. In fact, it was one of the early, real dramas in Emily's life that she asked her mother if she could see one of the little Holland children who was dying. Elizabeth Bishop wrote a really frightening poem about having seen a boy in a coffin when she was little, but Dickinson wanted to move towards that experience. It was the moment of Emerson, when Emerson, as some of you may remember, months and months after his wife died, went and opened the coffin to look at her. They wanted to confront those things.

So now we are probably up to the story, if we can say this quickly, of the publication of the poems. Susan had 300-400 of them. Vinnie discovered this huge cache and went to Susan and Susan kept saying, "I'll get to them, but I don't really think there's much of a public for them." Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who thought that Emily Dickinson was brilliant, and who thought her thoughts were brilliant, thought that the form of her poems was spasmodic and somewhat deplorable. There will be a wonderful biography of him coming out by Brenda Wineapple in three or four months. I think it's going to be called *White Heat*. He was a hugely important person for her, and as most of us know, she wrote to him and said, "Do my verses breathe? Are you too busy to tell me?" He wrote back and they have this correspondence. And then when he went to visit her he wrote to his wife that very night and said, "Her speech is the very wantonness of overstatement. I've never been with anyone who drains my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me." It had a very powerful, sexual quality. "She drew from me. Without touching her, she drew from me." And, "I'm glad I don't live near her."

Anyway, what happened was that Susan Gilbert kept putting it off until Vinnie decided she was too lazy to attend to it. Vinnie really wanted to get this done in her own lifetime. In fact, there's kind of a wonderful quote from Austin—I'll just read this quickly. He said that Vinnie was going to insist on publishing these poems, but she didn't really understand them and Austin didn't really understand them, either. "Whether it was on the whole advisable to publish is yet with me," Austin wrote. "But my sister Vin, whose knowledge of what is or has been outside of her dooryard is bounded by the number of her callers, who had no comprehension of her sister, yet believed her a shining genius, was determined to have some of her writing where it could be read of all men and she's expecting to become famous herself thereby, and now we shall see." The drama in this family was quite profound.

The person who ended up editing, with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published in 1890, four years after she died, was Mabel Loomis Todd, the mistress of her brother. She'd been the mistress of Austin for probably something like twelve years and would continue to be the mistress. Her own husband had a nervous breakdown. He was an important astronomer who had come to Amherst because they had a new observatory, and she was welcomed into the home of Susan and Austin, because Susan was a great saloniere, who entertained Webster and entertained Emerson and entertained Thoreau. Some people say it was part of Emily's revulsion from society, how much Susan threw herself into it. But anyway, she was faced with this absolute morass of stuff, and one of the most demanding things about the Dickinson manuscripts is that at crucial moments in many, many, many of the poems, Dickinson did not indicate final resolution for a word. She would put a little X above a very important word and then put six alternates. Richard Howard, for instance, believes that not only did she renounce publication, she wanted it to be an adventure of process for people in the future.

Anyway, they did bring the poems out. They fiddled with them, of course, because people felt the rhymes were too queer. My feeling about that is that if Mabel Loomis Todd and Wentworth Higginson had not smoothed out these poems and given them titles—thematic titles—and arranged them according to weather and sentimental topics, there would have been no popularity for them. Harvard would never have invested all that money in that 1955 very long edition, which changed the whole reception of Dickinson. For instance, Elizabeth Bishop thought Dickinson really wasn't much until she read the 1955 three-volume set, and then said, "She's the best that we have."

Anyway, there's a lot more to quote but maybe we should just get into the poems.

Braziller: Do you want to look at a few poems—

Quinn: Yes, let's do that.

Braziller: Okay, the first poem we'll be looking at is #340. I hope many of you brought them. We distributed some copies, and maybe you're just going to have to listen the best you can. It's #340—or share with someone next to you.

A: What's the first line?

Quinn: It's called, "I felt a funeral in my brain." I actually don't think you're going to have to read along because these poems are audibly very legible.

Braziller: Okay. I'll just begin by saying death seems to be her subject.

Braziller reads:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

Braziller: To get the ball rolling, I'll throw out a few things. It's very hard to look for a theme or to interpret. I think we have to look at the individual words a great deal with her, and her tones. Again, I would say her subject seems to be death, or is death. There's a tone of terror and suspense. It's a terrifying poem and I think it's a poem in which the mind almost seems to give way—there's a large weight of despair in the poem. In this sense she's dealing with a very, very private experience of affliction. I think this is a poem of anguish and affliction. I think we're going to see this in the poems we selected. There's like a great clarity to them and yet a great level of despair or terror in them.

Quinn: I think that's because a lot of my favorite poems were chosen by Ted Hughes for a selection that Faber published. Actually, I think his essay on Emily Dickinson is the finest essay. He refers to these poems, his favorite poems. Many of them are from that year, 1862, when she wrote 366 poems.

Braziller: All these poems are from '62 or '63, I think.

Quinn: Almost every one of them. He refers to this as a kind of trance state that she goes into. He says, "However important for her poetry her life of love, with all of its difficulties may have been, there's another experience quite as important, which seems to have befallen her often and which had nothing to do with her outer life. It's the subject of some of her greatest poems and all her best poems touch upon it, and it's what throws the aura of immensity and chill over her ideas and images." She never seems to have known what to make of it and that's what a lot of these poems address.

Braziller: She writes a lot of poems about ecstasy and a lot about agony, and the ones you selected are the vast majority of these. Somebody has said that there's a similarity in that both the experience of ecstasy and the experience of mental suffering of this nature obliterate reality and push it aside. That's to get started there, that they are highly focused and highly intense upon that experience and they push all aside.

Quinn: I think we can understand why solitude was so important for her, in that respect.

Braziller: But isn't it a poem of mental pressure? In other words, "treading, treading," and then the second stanza repeating "beating, beating." And the tolling bell and also the line you just quoted, "And Being but an Ear"—that would imply again this pushing away of reality. This pushing away of even thinking, and a complete focus on the world of some inner landscape and a very anguished one. She's dealing with that which is the most hard to talk about and I would think in her time, particularly, it would be—

Quinn: In her life.

Braziller: In her life. An inner life that knows great suffering. The subject, in a way, in many of these poems, is a form of acute suffering.

Quinn: Of heights and depths, yes.

A: But there seems to be really an assertion of independence itself in merely that same stanza, where it says, “As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear.” You’ve got this vision of being overwhelmed as an individual. Then she says, “And I, and Silence, some strange Race, / Wrecked, solitary, here—” She’s differentiating herself and in a way, standing up to the condition.

Braziller: But then she goes on and says, “And then a Plank in Reason.” Reason is ego; reason is consciousness; reason is continuity; reason is history; reason is memory. She’s dropping down through those and then hitting “a World at every plunge” and finished—the way I read it—and finished knowing it’s a state in which knowing is pushed aside, too. The pleasure of knowing or the ability, even, to know or to hold thought is threatened by dark forces and by some terror within.

Quinn: One of the ways I really like to read her, and I think most of you would, too—I own the Concordance, which you can find. It’s not all that rare. But you can make your own concordance. When I look at a poem like this, the word “bell” sounds out for me, and when I read her there’s a sort of cat’s cradle of reference to bells. This poem calls out to me to reread a tiny little poem which we put on the subway—the PSA put it on the subway—because of the word “plank.” You know, “then a Plank in Reason.” Here’s a whole different mood, but with the same image.

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

Quinn: It’s a different mood. If you look at the key words, which I love doing, it shows you all the different moods in which she approaches these key images. Her idea of death is not always so solemn, either. There’s a wonderful poem that begins,

There’s been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today—
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have—alway—
The Neighbors rustle in and out—
The Doctor—drives away—
A Window opens like a pod—
Abrupt—mechanically—

Somebody flings a mattress out, the neighbors wonder why, the children. A friend of mine says funerals were her TV. I think that's kind of true. But we should move on.

Braziller: Yes. Do you want to read the next one? You're going to read "After great pain."

Quinn: Yes, so this is another one from 1862 and it's a very famous poem.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round —
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone —

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

Quinn: There's a wonderful other poem that uses the word "stupor."

Did Our Best Moment last —
'Twould supersede the Heaven —
A few — and they by Risk — procure —
So this Sort — are not given —

Except as stimulants — in
Cases of Despair —
Or Stupor — The Reserve —
These Heavenly Moments are —

A Grant of the Divine —
That Certain as it Comes —
Withdraws — and leaves the dazzled Soul
In her unfurnished Rooms

Quinn: Again, it's just trying to follow these poems through words like "nerves" or "stupor." But I think one of the reasons this is such a famous poem is that image of the "Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs / The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore / And Yesterday, or Centuries before?"

Braziller: She's a poet of precision, a poet of shock and surprise and experimentation. And applying these gifts, again, to dealing with, in this case—there were a series of blows and losses she had in this time. When did her mother die? Was it around '61?

Quinn: No. Her mother died late, only maybe five years before she did. But she lost her tutor, Benjamin Newton, who left when she was a teenager, I think. He was the first person who believed in her poetry. And then Charles Wadsworth, the minister who Susan alluded to as someone who she passionately loved—adding to the legend of E.D.—he moved away to San Francisco and there are wonderful, passionate letters to him. Then she had a love affair with somebody named Judge Otis Lord, but that was later in her life. I think she was in her late 40s, early 50s.

A: When you say love affair, do you mean a physical, sexual love affair?

Quinn: Well, that's what Austin told Mabel Loomis Todd. I don't know.

I love all the early books. The first edition came out four years after she died, in 1890. They came out in all sorts of different ways. The daughter of Susan brought out a book—poems to Susan withheld by Vinnie. That was a whole volume. There was just a whole succession. It took until 1945 for all of them to come out. Then it was 1955 before the three-volume edition came out.

A: Is there any impact from the Civil War? This was in 1862, right in the middle of it.

Quinn: I think “Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed” is a poem about that. “To comprehend a nectar / Requires sorest need.” That was one of the ones published.

Braziller: It's interesting to speculate on the Civil War in the sense that it rarely comes into her poems, but somebody said that, while the whole country was battling for control or for authority, she was battling with herself. In a way, you could sort of say that this private agony, this unspeakable agony that she's battling with and dealing with, has, perhaps, an element of social criticism in it. It's really almost to say, better to stay in your room, in your own yard, and deal with this than what's going on historically. But I think the pressures of the Civil War—it was a vulgar and horrific thing and the world certainly was scarier and I think that these rather bleak poems we're looking at, it's no coincidence that they were written when they were.

Quinn: Right. Ted Hughes talks about the huge ideological battle that is going on at this time. That the country is facing either renewal or total suicide.

Braziller: And there's none of that in this poem. I'll point out too that there's no autobiography. Although they're intensely personal, intensely intimate, they go into the most frightening regions, they go into what cannot be spoken of, there is very little of her own biography in them, what caused them, or of herself. There's very little, in a way, history. And there's very little personal history. And yet—

Quinn: She was much more up on events than one would think. They were very close to Samuel Bowles, who is the editor of *The Springfield Republican* and there is speculation that she may have loved him. But she certainly read the paper every day and when asked whether she read

Whitman, she said, “No, I haven’t, but I’ve heard he’s disgusting.” Well, I don’t believe that. Her father had a good library.

A: What year was it when Austin and Susan got married? When she, in other words, lost Susan? Wasn’t that ’59 or so?

Quinn: Yes, I think it was around ’59.

A: It was just prior to this whole series of poems.

Quinn: And also the experience of blindness that took her to Boston. She had to live in a room of total darkness for six or seven months. Then there’s also all sorts of speculation from doctors not so many years after she died. There were people staring at the three photographs of Emily Dickinson and doctors were saying, “Well, she was *severely* wall-eyed and that may have been why she hid herself away.” The psychoanalytic literature started almost immediately.

A: I don’t know if you’ve ever heard an alternate theory that if she lived today she might be diagnosed as special ed. It’s not that silly because special ed. kids can be smart, they just have learning disabilities.

Quinn: Sure. Coming on Friday—you may have read in today’s paper—there’s the most enchanting film about a boy who has Asperger’s. You’ve got to watch it. It’s on Friday night, by Lizzie Gottlieb, and it’s wonderful. He’s the most wonderful boy. So you know, maybe that could be it. But Richard Sewell, who I think wrote the best biography, said, “Let’s walk into the mystery standing up.” Let’s not pigeon-hole this woman.

A: In this poem, as in the other, there is the curious sense of detachment, of the self looking at itself. And the innerness of the poems—they’re totally inner, they’re not outer-directed. But there are always two voices, or two entities, the detached one looking at the other. It’s just curious. I don’t know that other poems do that.

Quinn: You know where you’re going to see that, when we get to it completely, is “I heard a fly buzz when I died.”

A: I just wanted to make a statement. I did a little reading about her and she was very involved with the community. She looked out the window; she knew what the heck was going on. She knew all about Austin and Mabel too.

Quinn: Well, I think the love affair was conducted in her house.

A: Yes. She was up on things. I think a very interesting study—I wonder if you know about it—had been done about her and the Civil War, because the bodies used to come back to town for funerals all the time. There was an atmosphere of death all through the ‘60s that she could not escape from.

Quinn: Also there were young friends of hers who were Confederate soldiers.

Braziller: Well, there is a social awareness.

Quinn: I'd be surprised if somebody hadn't written about it.

Braziller: There were personal losses and then there were these bodies coming back and her subject was death. To take maybe one step further, songs and hymns that she heard as a child and that were in her father's library were, I think, the largest formal influence—

Quinn: Shakespeare was her important influence and the dictionary was huge for her.

Braziller: I believe when somebody dies, sometimes a boy comes out in the graveyard and actually sings some of these hymns.

Quinn: Right, the boys singing by the burial ground.

Braziller: Many times when I read her poems I think I'm dealing with both those things happening simultaneously, and dealing with an obsession with the horror and the terror of death, as well as her attempt to revive herself and sing her way into some tolerance or some acceptance, of some way of going on at the same time. If that's useful—to think of being obsessed with something that she can't shake and at the same time, thinking of hymns and songs that would resurrect her or in some way transcend the experience.

A: In addition to the Civil War, in that period, in the 19th century, people died all the time. Infants died, small children died.

Quinn: Yes. She had a lot of cousins that died.

Braziller: She had a special nephew, right? Didn't Austin's son die at eight years old?

Quinn: Yes.

A: I can't even imagine how much death was around her all the time.

Braziller: I agree. And why the singing of these songs, and why religion was so dominant and so important. How does one deal with this, really? If there is a deep psychic scar with her, then it's going to be even more intense and more extreme, and this is what she shared with us in her poems.

A: I have a question about her voice. I love the way she uses perfect rhymes like "snow" and "go," but she also mixes in these things like transforming "hour of lead" into "if outlived." Is she the first person to combine these slant rhymes and these perfect rhymes?

Quinn: No, Shakespeare is. Shakespeare was a great, great model for her. She really learned so much for him.

Braziller: "In the beginning was the word," you know, but every word with her was thought out.

Quinn: You know, like the riddles of Shakespeare—she loved those riddles. She's a riddling poet, really. And that pictograph, that mosaic texture. Ted Hughes talks about that, too. I think you should read "It was not death."

Braziller: Yes.

Quinn: Let's listen to the humor in this poem.

Braziller reads:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down —
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos — crawl —
Nor Fire — for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool —

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine —

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some —

When everything that ticked — has stopped —
And Space stares all around —
Or Grisly frosts —first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground —

But, most, like Chaos — Stopless —cool —
Without a Chance, or Spar —
Or even a Report of Land —
To justify — Despair.

Quinn: That last couplet is so incredible, isn't it? It's so dramatic. I love the drama in her poems. Also, to keep your eye on poems that turn on the topic of despair, one of them begins, "Safe Despair it is that raves— / Agony is frugal." She has a very strict attitude. "The healed heart shows its shallow scar." If you can get over something, it didn't hurt you that much. If you look in the Concordance, there are probably 50 poems that turn on the subject of despair. I think we can safely understand that she felt intimate with that.

A: What's a chancel?

Quinn: It's a new church.

Braziller: It's an area for the clergy, isn't it?

A: A Lord's Supper takes place because she has the tasting after that, too.

Quinn: Yes. See, she's always using religious imagery. Also, those three- and four-beat lines are like hymns. A contemporary audience would have understood these poems. I think we can go right to "There's a certain Slant of light" because it deals with something of the same.

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are—

None may teach it—Any—
'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—

Quinn: Again, I think it's got a seal—it's "An imperial affliction"—and the seal is despair. It's an appointment that you have with this, and it's an anointment that you can experience it fully. And it's not to be shied away from, right?

Braziller: Yes. Again, without being autobiographical, without talking about herself, she's sharing a state of awareness of enormous weight. I love the opening: "There's a certain Slant of light, / Winter Afternoons— / That oppresses." There's another poem we're looking at where the brain comes—the brain is deeper than the sea, the brain is wider than the sky. In a way, this internal world is wider than the seasons, because there are different ways one could respond to a slant of light on a winter afternoon, but the fact of her awareness is that it oppresses, and it weighs upon her. Her inner landscape, her inner reality is what her work is about.

Quinn: I like "When it comes, the Landscape listens—...When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death—" That's despair—when it comes, when it goes. And the seal, again. There's a love poem which probably many of you know—there's all this speculation about it, that when she had to renounce personal love she wrote a great deal about the divine aspect of life and her direct route to that. One of those poems begins: "Mine—by the Right of the White Election! / Mine—by the Royal Seal! / Mine—by the Sign in the Scarlet prison— / Bars—cannot conceal!" Again, it's one of those experiences that has a seal on it, like despair.

A: Was this poem edited? Did they take out the capitals?

Braziller: No, there are capitals here—

Quinn: Emily Dickinson used capital letters.

A: I mean in the other poems, there are capitalized words all over.

Quinn: Oh, yes. She did that. Fame, Life, Despair.

A: So that's why I'm asking if this one was edited so there are no capital letters.

Quinn: There are capital letters. For instance, the Seal and Despair are capitalized. If you don't have that, maybe you downloaded it and you just don't have—

A: We're looking at "It was not death, for I stood up."

Quinn: Oh yes, sorry.

A: There are very few capitals.

Quinn: Well she didn't treat every poem the same. She capitalized Night, she capitalized Bells, she capitalized Marble and Chancel and Burial and Autumn and Report and Despair. So there are a lot of capitals in my edition, anyway.

A: Are they usually hers? Are they always hers?

Quinn: I think they are. Unless you get an old volume, and by the way, they are available. You can go to the Strand and pick up 1920 editions of Emily Dickinson and they're great to read. One is called *Bolts of Melody*. There's an old book—when Mabel Loomis Todd passed on, her daughter, who was going to have a brilliant career as an academic, gave her life over to the Dickinson enterprise, too, and published a book called *Ancestors Brocade* and it was really popular. You can still find that in the Strand. It's filled with contemporary, personal reminiscence of the Dickinson family. Of course that's used in all of the great biographies: the Sewell biography and the wonderful biography by the woman who wrote the Edith Wharton book too, Cynthia Wolff. I love that book. So they quote those early pieces of testimony. But it's wonderful to read them just hot off the press. Whether some of it is made up or not, it really doesn't matter.

A: Maybe this goes without saying, but I think for me and many people here—psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts—in terms of just describing internal phenomena, there's just no other equal. You might even call it a science of the emotions. Sometimes I share some of these poems with patients and they say, oh, those are the words that describe exactly what I'm feeling. Nothing that I say can get as precise as that. She is such a master.

Braziller: That's very smart. That's very important, what you said, because it is a very—

Quinn: They're so truthful.

Braziller: They're truthful but they're very detached, too. There's an objectifying of her state that is really remarkable.

Quinn: Let's go to "The soul has bandaged moments."

Braziller: Do I read this?

Quinn: That's you. Read this slowly, Mike.

Braziller: Okay. See, when we talk about her affliction, the really remarkable thing is that many people with similar afflictions—maybe hysterical or extremely depressed—didn't write 1,800 poems in the course of about fifteen to twenty years. And so boldly and bravely and scientifically, to use your word, describe the state itself.

A: I wasn't mythologizing her. I think she described *all* emotions fully.

Quinn: Now this one is so dramatic. A more conversational poem on a related topic begins: "I cannot live with you, / It would be life, / And life is over there / Behind the shelf."

Braziller: This poem is as complex as all her stuff, but there are, again, many frightening moments in it, and it depicts great internal fear, I think.

Braziller reads:

The Soul has Bandaged moments —
When too appalled to stir —
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her —

Salute her — with long fingers —
Caress her freezing hair —
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover — hovered — o'er —
Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme — so — fair —

The soul has moments of Escape —
When bursting all the doors —
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee — delirious borne —
Long Dungeoned from his Rose —
Touch Liberty — then know no more,
But Noon, and Paradise —

The Soul's retaken moments —
When, Felon led along,

With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the Song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,
These, are not brayed of Tongue –

Quinn: That wonderful word, “brayed.”

A: It’s a way of speech that you dish out the words in a different tone. Braying is like a donkey braying.

Quinn: Right. It’s like, “they speak of hallowed things and embarrass my dog.”

A: What about the sexual aspect of this poem?

Quinn: I think it’s absolutely incredible. Dancing “like a Bomb, abroad / And swings upon the Hours.”

Braziller: Where she says, “The soul has moments of Escape,” does that mean some transcendence? Doesn’t it sound as if the poem tries at that moment, stanza three, “bursting all the doors,” that the soul, which could be viewed as a condensed self, that it’s not just passive, suffering, frightened, and in such a state? Here she begins to explore a shift in tone. It’s interesting—“She dances like a Bomb.”

Now, we’re going to talk—I think the last poem was the gun poem, but is there some notion that there’s some danger or some explosion in her joy?

Quinn: Certainly everyone that knew her said that relationships were hazardous for her, that she knew that they were at such a pitch that they could be disastrous for her. That early friendship with Sue—“Sue, you can go or stay, pass on singing, Sue, up the distant hills. I’ll journey on.” This is a very highly driven heart.

Braziller: And it’s a very intense existence, because it’s either this ecstasy of the bee drawing near the rose or this despair of the gallows, practically.

Quinn: She talks about the heart as a miser in her letters—“It’s a little miser.” And the Puritan culture bearing down on her too. Austin wasn’t a Puritanical person and neither was she, really, but the culture was.

Braziller: And stanza four: “As do the Bee—delirious borne / Long Dungeoned from his Rose / Touch Liberty”—touch is liberty—“then know no more, / But Noon, and Paradise.” Maybe this is one of the few moments in all these poems that we’re looking at in this selection we made tonight where some ecstasy is imagined or near, but then at the end it seems to sink back down to “shackles” and “staples” and being welcomed by the horror.

Quinn: Michael, you mentioned song before. Here there are staples in the song when the soul is imprisoned again. I think it’s a very clear metaphor for verse, too. But “horror”—now, that’s

something to watch for in her poetry. That word does not appear that often. That's a very strong word.

Braziller: And “not brayed of Tongue” would mean they can't even be spoken of, or they're so animalistic or so shrill or so—

Quinn: And so profound.

Braziller: And so dominating over the rest of her personality—not her personality, but of the sensibility within the poem—that they drown out other awareness or other possibilities. Would you like to read one?

Quinn: Yes. Does anybody know whether the word Gibbets is a hard or a soft G? Is it Gibbets or is it Jibbets, because I—

A: Jibbets.

Quinn: I always pronounce it that way, but I'm not really sure. So the metaphor here is— Dickinson wrote a lot about maelstrom. She looked up the water in the ocean and she identified maelstrom, and it had a powerful emotional quality for her. So this is about a maelstrom of agony.

Quinn reads:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyed coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem —
And you dropt, lost,
When something broke —
And let you from a Dream —

As if a Goblin with a Gauge —
Kept measuring the Hours —
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws —

And not a Sinew — stirred — could help,
And sense was setting numb —
When God — remembered — and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome —

As if your Sentence stood — pronounced —
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt

To Gibbets, and the Dead —

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Reprieve"!
Which Anguish was the utterest — then —
To perish, or to live?

Quinn: Ha! That's one of her great poems. I love it! "Which Anguish was the utterest—then"—that measuring. And also "When God—remembered—" She has a wonderful poem about an apple dropping from a tree and God is involved in that, and the power of the sun is involved. Why is it that moment when it drops?

Braziller: Also, if we look at some reciprocities with earlier poems—we looked at the tonal shift in the earlier poem we just read, and in stanza two, it says, "Toyed coolly with the final inch / Of your delirious Hem"—that again might imply some transcendence, or something of joy or sensuousness. Of sense, even. But "you dropt, lost, / When something broke— / And let you from a Dream." For some reason, this poem's cadence reminds me of the very first poem, "I felt a funeral in my brain." If you look here: "If you dropt lost, / When something broke." The last stanza in the first poem that we looked at: "And then a plank in reason, broke, / And I dropped down and down." So this notion of trying to rise up within the poem for a moment and then resuming a fall out of her control is running through a lot of these poems.

Quinn: There's a wonderful line—I don't remember which poem it's in, but it's "Crisis is a hair." From one moment to the next, anything can happen. That drop—there's a lot of that drop in her poetry. You might want to read—just because of "And when the Film had stitched her eyes,"—you might want to read "I saw no Way—The heavens were stitched."

A: Before you read, can you just talk about it a little bit? I'm feeling very frustrated. I expected that you would explain things. Who is "your delirious hem?" Who is she talking to? "And you dropt, lost."

Quinn: I think it's a self-portrait of a state of mind, of a very frightening emotion. She has a poem, "One need not be a mansion to be haunted." It's about a sense of chaos. You could speak to this, Doctor. It's about facing something.

A: I think it's interesting because literally seconds before you said that, it occurred to me that the thing about her poetry—it's like rock music. You don't have to understand it to enjoy it.

Braziller: You don't have to interpret it to enjoy it. It's not meant to be interpreted.

Quinn: Mystery is great.

Braziller: Yes. It's a rush of images which depicts, experiments, shocks, and surprises. Precisely each word is chiseled and chosen with great care. She's describing what is going on in the mind of some person or some sensibility. She's describing a state of falling, a state of suffocation, a state of forgetfulness, a state which pushes meaning aside. It's a mood. Think of it that way, if

that's helpful to you. It isn't meant to be, nor are we capable of, nor should it be, interpreted image for image.

Quinn: No, but I understand your objection. I was hoping that by putting certain of these poems together that thematically they would just announce themselves. For instance, "The Soul has Bandaged moments," and at the end the soul is a felon who's been imprisoned. But just before the final punishment, when he's going to be murdered, someone says, oh, God remembers. Oh, no, no. Don't assassinate that prisoner. Let him go. And at the end she says, "Which anguish is worse? Coming up to that moment and then being let go and not knowing when again you'll be taken up in that same battle?"

Here, I think what you've got is this image of a maelstrom in the sea. I'm not much of a scientist, but there is a rule to a maelstrom and it has to play itself out. It's like being overtaken by something like a storm.

A: Like a hurricane.

A: But doesn't sexuality make its way into this?

Quinn: Oh yes, all of them. I mean, many of the great poems.

A: It's like a maelstrom within us that every day you're "Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel / Until the Agony."

Quinn: And then the image is "Toyed coolly with the final inch of your hem." Agony is toying with you, like pulling at you. But she refers to it as "your delirious Hem." Her adjectives are very vital and sometimes quite peculiar.

A: She has easier and harder poems. She's a little bit of an acquired taste. The trick, I think, is to read some of the easier poems first. Then you kind of get a taste for her. At least, that was my experience.

Quinn: Because we were going to be here with the psychoanalysts, I planned to dive right into the wreck.

A: So if it's something you want to enter into, read some of her easier ones first and then—

Quinn: Yes, if you get the silver book and you start at the beginning—these poems are from a year in her life when she wrote almost 400 poems and was in the grip of something amazing. They are among her strongest poems.

So the image here is there's a goblin and the goblin is measuring the hours that this prisoner is going to live. There's no help for this prisoner. His or her sense is beginning to get numb, and then God remembers and says, oh, let her go. Let her go from that. Then she moves to this image of the film. "When the film had stitched your eyes," as if it were like a pageant that she was describing, something like a drama.

Braziller: One more question, and we'll have time at the end, too, but go ahead.

A: Obviously, the more knowledge you have and the more sensitivity to the period, the better your interpretation is going to be. I don't think it's just a matter of reading this. Is there any text—for example, does the three-volume edition gloss any of these terms?

Quinn: Well, what it will give you are the variants, where she hadn't made up her mind about a critical word.

Braziller: The best thing to use is the Oxford English dictionary.

A: So there is no edition—I mean, there's *The Collected Poems*. I have *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Selected Poems*. None of them actually have put notes on individual words.

Quinn: They won't give you commentary on the poems, but if you get the three-volume Thomas Johnson—

A: \$125?

Quinn: No.

A: Oh no. That's the three-volume of Franklin that's \$125.

Quinn: Yes, it's really great. Franklin is a manuscript expert, but I prefer Johnson, who really worked with the poems all his life.

A: I'm intrigued with your interpretation of this drama and the prisoner, but can you tell me where you get that there's this prisoner in here?

Quinn: Well, he or she is in a dungeon.

A: At the conclusion, you're saying, "From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt."

Quinn: Right.

Braziller: And Gibbets is our gallows.

Quinn: Remember the poem, "And even a report of land / To justify Despair"? The image is, if you're way out at sea and you saw that land and you knew you couldn't get to it, that would justify your despair, but you don't even have that.

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing its boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyed coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem —
And you dropt, lost,

When something broke —
And let you from a Dream —

As if a Goblin with a Gauge —
Kept measuring the Hours —
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws —

And not a Sinew — stirred — could help,
And sense was setting numb —
When God — remembered — and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome —

As if your Sentence stood — pronounced —
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
To Gibbets, and the Dead —

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped "Reprieve"!
Which Anguish was the utterest — then —
To perish, or to live?

A: Nobody's talked about the fact that in the maelstrom you're rescued three times. The rhythm of it—each one is more terrible than the next.

Braziller: That's right.

A: It's harrowing.

Braziller: Sometimes she's just writing about getting through it. What was the poem we read earlier?

Quinn: "First chill then stupor"?

Braziller: Yes. What happens when somebody freezes, and then letting go. It's just sort of waiting it out, not for transcendence, but for some amount of relief or change or pause in it. There seems to be a pause, a break in her affliction, or in the way she's describing it.

The next poem I'd like to read is a brilliant little poem, which is relatively simple and sticks with many of the things we've been discussing, and that is "The Brain, within its Groove."

Quinn: This should appeal to the medical people here.

Braziller: Yes, this is the great psychoanalytic poem that she wrote. It's beautiful. Again, she speaks through this rush of images.

Braziller reads:

The Brain, within its Groove
Runs evenly — and true —
But let a Splinter swerve —
'Twere easier for You —

To put a Current back —
When Floods have slit the Hills —
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves —
And trodden out the Mills —

Braziller: What a delicate and really remarkable—it opens with this brief description of some sort of moment of tranquility, of steadiness. The brain runs true. But one little splinter, one little scar—

Quinn: Right. “Crisis is a hair.”

Braziller: “Crisis is a hair,” yes. Then something goes wrong. It’s easier to push a whole current back. The imagery of these grooves and currents and floods and turnpikes to where the end—“trodden out the Mills”—what I see there, and I’m not even sure of this—it means that the current of despair, the current of chaos is so large and has risen so high that Mills would be something that functions, that works, that produces. The functioning self or the working self or the thinking self, even, is not even visible.

Quinn: A little town.

Braziller: Yes, it’s like under the water. Here’s an example. I think this is a great psychoanalytic poem.

Quinn: I love the lightness of touch with “And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves.” As if this assaultive force had its own thing to do and its own little greedy agenda.

Braziller: And “with Floods that slit the hills”—to end, after that, “And trodden out the Mills.” There are so many different ways she could say that, but nobody but her would say “And trodden out the Mills.”

A: I have in my book “blotted out the Mills.”

Quinn: That’s because that was one of the alternative words.

Braziller: I prefer “trodden” because it’s so unexpected.

Quinn: This is why it’s worth spending \$125 on the three volumes because the truth is, you can wake up and look at one poem, or three poems, on a whole Saturday that have these variants and just go off into this transfixing daydream. How does each one alter the whole poem?

Braziller: What does it say, again? Not “trodden,” but—?

A: “Blotted.”

Braziller: “Blotted out the Mills.” That’s a good one, but water might blot. Water never trods. I think “trodden” is the more unexpected, more experimental word.

A: For you, does “trodden” mean that it actually builds the mills or destroys them?

Quinn: It destroys them.

A: It stumps it out.

A: The term “trodden” might suggest something else.

Braziller: I know, but my point is that this is her originality. This is the element of shock and surprise and the unexpected, which is her gift.

Quinn: I think you were right when you said before “blotted” belongs more to floods. But the fact that she nixes it and has the flood “trodding” is part of her vitality as a poet, I think.

Braziller: Was there another one?

Quinn: Yes, there was one that was on the subway that I was very happy to tell you and that’s “The brain is wider than the sky.” Here it is.

Braziller: Now here too, this is a rather simple one. Here I think she speaks most directly about the way in which the self and the inner landscape is everything.

Braziller reads:

The Brain — is wider than the Sky —
For — put them side by side —
The one the other will contain
With ease — and You — beside —

The Brain is deeper than the sea —
For — hold them — Blue to Blue —
The one the other will absorb —
As Sponges — Buckets — do —

The Brain is just the weight of God —
For — Heft them — Pound for Pound —
And they will differ — if they do —
As Syllable from Sound —

Quinn: What I would really suggest is to memorize some of these poems. They just seep into your skin. They seep into your bloodstream. They’re mysterious and they’re riddling, but they’re so potent for that very reason. “The Brain is just the weight of God”—somebody could say, “We’re just a prisoner of our way of thinking.” That’s the hackneyed way of saying “The Brain

is just the weight of God— / For – Heft them – Pound for Pound—/ And they will differ—if they do— /As Syllable from Sound.”

A: Isn't that sacrilegious?

A: Sure.

Quinn: Yes. Two years before she died, she said, “Consider the lilies of the fields the only commandment I ever obeyed.”

A: Is there a little Transcendentalism?

Quinn: Oh, yes. She was a Transcendentalist, I think. She was a real Emersonian.

Braziller: Would you like to read “The Wind?”

Quinn: Yes. Now, the image here is of the wind. The wind is like a man coming to knock on the door and I think it's really dramatic and very funny and very modern.

The Wind—tapped like a tired Man—
And like a Host—“Come in”
I boldly answered—entered then
My Residence within

A Rapid—footless Guest—
To offer whom a Chair
Were as impossible as hand
A Sofa to the Air—

No Bone had He to bind Him—
His Speech was like the Push
Of numerous Humming Birds at once
From a superior Bush—

His Countenance—a Billow—
His Fingers, as He passed
Let go a music—as of tunes
Blown tremulous in Glass—

He visited—still flitting—
Then like a timid Man
Again, He tapped—'twas flurriedly—
And I became alone—

Quinn: It's one of her great phrases: “I became alone.” It turns up in a number of poems.

Braziller: This gentleman keeps talking about sexual imagery in her poems and this is one poem, this reading of it, it seems, where we can't avoid it. Something enters into her world and then she's left alone.

Quinn: The sexual aspect, I think, is so gorgeously deepened by "my residence within."

Braziller: Yes. "Come in," she says.

Quinn: "Come in." It's a little different from Robert Frost.

Braziller: "His Speech was like the Push"—again, it's always the unexpected word, the unexpected image. "His Speech was like the Push / Of numerous Humming Birds at once / From a superior Bush."

Quinn: Not everybody is of the elect. If you get the wind coming into yourself like this, you're of the elect. I love that: "A Rapid—footless Guest— / To offer whom a Chair / Were as impossible as hand / A Sofa to the Air—"

Braziller: Oh yeah, that's great.

Quinn: There's a poem that begins, "How happy is the little Stone / That wanders in the Road alone / And doesn't think about Careers / And Exigencies never fears." It's a very Beckett-like poem, but how wonderful it is to be anonymous and alone on the road and unnoticed. There's a whole different tone to the way the word "alone" is in this poem.

A: This version has taken out the dashes.

Quinn: There's a lot of that.

Braziller: There's a lot of discussion of the dashes. But the dashes seem to have been very important to her. And they really are essential to her—

Quinn: But again, I think if Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson hadn't tidied up these poems, people would have said, pfft! It's like Richard Stein. In that era, they just wouldn't have been read. They would have seemed too strange.

A: Is that what these were copied from?

Quinn: Well, I don't know what version you have.

A: I've got the Johnson.

Quinn: Johnson may have added a few commas, but he was pretty meticulous. I think to feel calm about it, you should get the Johnson edition. To feel confident.

Braziller: "My life has stood a loaded gun."

Quinn: This is probably one of the hardest poems of Emily Dickinson's. If any of you have insight into it, please speak up.

Braziller: You'll see right away that there's a narrative to it, almost like a children's nursery rhyme. There's a folk element that makes it a real departure from the other poems we've read and yet, again, another surprise coming from her, another unexpected turn.

Braziller reads:

My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —
In Corners — till a Day
The Owner passed — identified —
And carried Me away —

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods —
And now We hunt the Doe —
And every time I speak for Him —
The Mountains straight reply —

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow —
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through —

And when at Night — Our good Day done —
I guard My Master's Head —
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow — to have shared —

To foe of His — I'm deadly foe —
None stir the second time —
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye —
Or an emphatic Thumb —

Though I than He — may longer live
He longer must — than I —
For I have but the power to kill,
Without — the power to die —

A: What I think this means is that it's the gun that carries the me, or Dickinson away, and then her entire life afterward is defined by having the gun. She has the power to kill because of it, but she can never die. The gun overpowers her, in a sense.

Braziller: Well, no. The owner of the gun carries her away.

Quinn: But she's the gun.

A: She has the power to kill but she doesn't have the power to die. It's kind of like she and the gun become confused and meld into an awful object together.

Quinn: Yes, I think that's part of it.

Braziller: I think that's right. A lot of the emotional states she depicts are very complex, very true, very real, and one approach to this might be to say that her awareness of good and evil are, in a way, the same, inseparable. I think that's what you're trying to say.

Quinn: It's such a tender poem.

Braziller: Right. It's both a violent and a tender poem. The language is tender.

Quinn: "I've shared his pillow."

A: I was just thinking that maybe it's about her own power, because she says that she's the owner of the gun and it's about her—like she's guarding—

Quinn: She *is* the gun.

A: "To foe of His—I'm deadly foe / None stir the second time" if they oppose her will. I think the gun maybe represents her will, her power.

Quinn: The will is a good choice. But who's the owner? Is the owner a deity?

A: No, I think she is.

A: She doesn't identify herself as the owner.

A: I think she is the gun and the gun is the power of speech and her power of poetry.

Quinn: Then there's no power to die, there. That's the immortality of the verse.

Braziller: How about this? The owner is the one to whom she could give love and passion. The owner is the one to whom she's obsessed. Perhaps she sits in seclusion and isolation, thinking of their relationship—that's sort of how I read it. If that's helpful, I don't know. Somebody said of her that she was married to herself. But she was obsessive and she was very deeply involved with many men and women that she met. This poem seems almost like an allegory to me—I'm not sure of this, I'll just throw it out, if it's useful—of the power of fantasy love, or an imagined love.

Quinn: To the power to kill her own feeling.

Braziller: The power to kill her own feelings, the violence inherent in it, the importance of having a fantasy relationship, or an unrequited relationship. The dependency, the need for it, even though it's unrequited and it can never come into reality.

A: I think it's about power.

Braziller: Yes.

A: Some people have interpreted the poem that the owner is her self-awareness and that the loaded gun is her rage, her instinct, her body, and that's what never dies at the end.

Braziller: Very good. Right.

A: I mean, that that will always be there. Also, to talk about the sexual implication, this poem is just filled.

Braziller: It's filled with aggression, frustration.

Quinn: She very rarely mentions dreaming. She goes straight into the dream state without saying that.

Braziller: And where does this come from? "To foe of His—I'm deadly foe / None stir the second time"?

Quinn: Again, her power.

A: I kill, I kill.

A: I also kind of wondered that it might not be her struggle with God, because there are a couple of hymn references. They're slightly adapted from hymn lyrics: "The Mountains straight reply." I almost wonder if the owner is taking the power of life and death rather than giving it to God.

Quinn: I think that's really smart.

A: If there's a struggle there. I'm not saying she has a clear answer to that, but that could be a part of her existential struggle. I'm wondering if it's just me in the end or if there is a greater power. Am I the owner of my life or is God the owner?

Braziller: Yes, and she refers to the word "master," which is very interesting. Although, refresh my memory, were there letters at the end, or poems, where she wrote about a master?

Quinn: There were three letters that were addressed to a "master" and they were incredible.

Braziller: Yes, these were men that she—

Quinn: Well, they don't really know.

A: But that would have been also in the religious tracts of the day. Master would have been a common name, a religious reference.

Braziller: Right. She chose it for that reason, but I think when she wrote about it in her letters, rather than use the specific names of people she was obsessed with and had fallen in love with in the solitude of her room, she began to use the word "master" in several places.

Quinn: Up at the Dickinson house you can buy the three letters that were addressed to the "master."

A: I think she was a pretty playful person. She must have written ten or twelve or fifteen poems about objects, just personifying objects. What the hell—I'll just take a gun and go there. She gives us the opportunity to read everything we want to in the 21st century into it. But she's had a lot of fun.

A: We've been looking at the poem as though when she says "my" and "I," that's referring to her as the actual poet. I'm not sure that's true.

A: This gentleman's comment is connected with that, that there's this playing with this object or image. It's not so directly autobiographical or even necessarily referring to her own emotions, Emily Dickinson's.

Quinn: But the poems describe such vivid states that it would be hard to assume that she hadn't experienced those strongly.

Braziller: As we discuss this, I feel that for whatever reason I want to repeat my interpretation. I still read it, more emphatically, as the relationship of a fantasy of her solitude, her solitary self, with the need to have the fantasy. The need for the energy, the need for the vitality of imagining a relationship that wasn't going to happen.

Quinn: I still think she had those relationships. However they proceeded, I think she had them.

If we don't have much time, maybe we should go to the end. Probably everybody knows "I heard a fly buzz when I died," right? "The stillness in the room / Was like the stillness in the air / Between the heavens of storm."

I think the drama in this poem is so interesting because the speaker is describing what is happening while he or she is dying. The opening lines are so incredible.

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

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

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

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—

And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

Quinn: Again, a reference to anthem: from sea to sea. I appreciate your mentioning the mountains replying.

Braziller: As people have been saying, she must have watched many people die. Here she tries to put all of those observations together, and the interesting part is she imagines her own death, but it's sort of less horrifying than those she had to witness, to watch.

A: Well, it's not horrifying also because of that fly. That ordinary little fly.

Braziller: As a comic element, an earthy element.

Quinn: As a "life goes on"—

Braziller: Comic relief.

Quinn: It's so exciting to enter into the description of these states. There's a poem that begins, "I have never seen 'Volcanoes,'— / But, when Travellers tell" about them, and she goes on, "If the stillness is Volcanic / In the human face, / When upon a pain titanic / Features keep their place." She's very aware of containment. It's thrilling.

Braziller: The fly that she mentions is both comic and it accentuates the stillness of the room.

Quinn: And the reverence of that moment.

Braziller: It's life. It's buzzing. It's going on in the midst of this great—yes, somebody way in the back there.

A: There's a Donne poem, in which—I wish I remembered it—the speaker is courting and says, "Why does this fly have more freedom than I do to roam over your body?" I was going to ask if you thought that in that library in her father's house there were any metaphysical poets like John Donne and Andrew Marvell, because certainly the surprise, the shock element, the reversal is very similar.

Quinn: I know of course that T.S. Eliot made everybody completely aware of the importance of the metaphysical poets, as they were called, but I don't know if they were popular at the time. She talks about reading Keats, Browning—Elizabeth Barrett Browning—Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Brown the naturalist. The dictionary. If Donne was published, she probably read him.

Braziller: Many critics compare her or see a similarity with Donne and have mentioned it. I think in the realm of ecstasy, or very intense experience, very delicately or very precisely captured.

Quinn: She did, after all, live in a college town and they were very close to, very *of* the college.

A: Has she ever mentioned Poe? There's so much echo of Poe in her poetry.

Quinn: I think she did read Poe.

Braziller: And people have mentioned Blake. Almost like a self-taught or a primitive kind of similarity.

Quinn: Mabel Loomis Todd, in the first edition of her poems, compares her to Blake.

Levy: Alice, now that we're making comparisons and we're reaching towards the end, I'll throw a Hail Mary out there.

Braziller: Uh-oh. Watch out, Alice.

Levy: Is there any sense at all in comparisons of Dickinson with Kafka? To the extent that they recluse themselves, to the extent that their careers were reconstituted—I mean, as a career, looking at the totality—

Quinn: And also, what about the drama? “Dearest Father, you ask why I maintain I’m afraid of you?”

Levy: Yes, absolutely.

Quinn: She was very unafraid to go into the—

A: The fly in some sense—and maybe it’s already been alluded to—to some extent represents continuation of her.

Braziller: Yes, yes.

A: If you read the third stanza: “I willed my keepsakes, signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable, and then / There interposed a fly,” carrying off the unassignable aspects.

Quinn: Yes, I love that.

Braziller: Why don’t we do two more?

Quinn: We have to do the Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Braziller: Which one is that?

Quinn: “I think I was enchanted.”

Braziller: Okay, why don’t you read that and maybe this will be the last one.

Quinn: There’s a short Shakespearean poem that’s very, very dark, and I thought we could hear that one and then one last poem, which is about Emily Dickinson reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning for the first time and becoming enchanted with poetry itself.

So the really dark poem, the Shakespearean poem, she wrote just a couple of years before she died.

By homely gift and hindered Words
The human heart is told
Of Nothing —
"Nothing" is the force
That renovates the World —

Quinn: I think that's a very Shakespearean poem. And the poem about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which I love—do many of you know Amy Clampitt's poetry? Amy wanted this read at her funeral, and I read it. I felt that she was feeling that there was continuity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Dickinson to her.

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl —
I read that Foreign Lady —
The Dark — was beautiful —

And whether it was noon at night —
Or only Heaven — at Noon —
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell —

The Bees — became as Butterflies —
The Butterflies — as Swans —
Approached — and spurned the narrow Grass —
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer —
I took for Giants — practising
Titanic Opera —

The Days — to Mighty Metres stepped —
The Homeliest — adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed —

I could not have defined the change —
Conversion in the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul —
Is witnessed — not explained —

'Twas a Divine Insanity —
The Danger to be Sane
Should I again experience —
'Tis Antidote to turn —

To Tomes of solid Witchcraft —

Magicians be asleep —
But Magic — hath an Element
Like Deity — to keep —

Braziller: It's a great poem to end on, isn't it?

Quinn: It's about falling in love with poetry.