

The Posture of the Key

Teaching Emily Dickinson to Prisoners

The following article is an excerpt from Jordan Clary's "Three Voices: Teaching Crane, Dickinson, and Whitman," which appears in the newly issued T&W Guide to Classic American Literature.
—the Editors

Jordan Clary

There is no way to work in a prison and not feel as if your blood has turned to concertina wire in your veins. There are sounds unique to prison: the creak of heavy doors sliding open, the jarring clang of them slamming shut, the beeps of scanners as you slide your ID under a laser. You are issued keys that look like dinosaur teeth, which you have to loop over your belt, a cold reminder of where you are. There is a tension, a violence and hatred in the air. As I drove home after a night of teaching at the prison, watching the moon shining over the sage and bitter brush of the high desert, I couldn't stop thinking about the men inside, about the revolving, colorless world, the 80,000-watt bulbs that circle all night long from the tower, the yard and the lethal electric fence surrounding it all.

The creative writing classes I taught were through the Arts-In-Corrections program, which also offered classes in music, visual arts, and drama. At least one of my classes always took place on the high security yard, where most of the men were doing anywhere from several years to life. Many of the men told me that the arts program literally saved them. It was the one place they could escape the tension of the yard and for a short time explore their creative urges. Very few wrote about prison life. Most turned to memories and imagination, to anything that took them away from those gray walls.

One week a young man joined the class who remembered reading Emily Dickinson in school. He couldn't remember her poems, but something about her style stayed with him, and he asked me if I would bring in some of her poems. The following week, the man who made the request wasn't there and I never saw him again, but I had a packet of Dickinson's poems, including several of her well-known poems, such as:

#1732

My life closed twice before its close—
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

The packet also included such lesser known, esoteric works as:

#1158

Best Witchcraft is Geometry
To the magician's mind—
His ordinary acts are feats
To thinking of mankind.

I was surprised by the number of prisoners for whom Dickinson's rich inner world especially resonated. I had thought they would find her too prim. Was it the work's slightly witchy, magical qualities? The uneven cadence? Her quirky use of punctuation and capitalization? Her internal musings? Whatever it was, reading Dickinson seemed to have a liberating influence on the men's poetry, and more than one told me their experience of her bordered on the mystical. Her reclusive life and the smallness of her physical world only added to her enigma.

One of my favorite classes was a writing class I taught on the A yard. I taught this class on and off for three years. The same core group of men have attended from the beginning, and are, I believe, still attending as other instructors keep the writing workshop going. During my time with them, we were able to spend several weeks or months on a particular body of writing; besides Dickinson, we also studied Marianne Moore and Walt Whitman.

The following two poems from the class are by Lou Gary, and were published in a 1998 issue of the journal *Razor Wire*. Lou was one of the most brilliant men I have ever met. He was also an exception to the general prison population in that he was highly educated and well read, not only in literature but in physics, natural science, and many other subjects. I worked with him for several years and watched his work evolve in many ways. As well as poetry, he wrote fine short stories and personal essays. One day Lou brought in drafts of these two poems, an experiment in rhythm and cadence with a single sentence:

"I was surprised by the number of prisoners for whom Dickinson's rich inner world especially resonated."

SWM

SWM, 40, seeks partner who can recite Jerry Garcia's "Ashes to Ashes" in the 70s, 80s, and 90s version, and can talk into the night of Sweet Magnolia, weaving stories of the London performance at the Rainbow Theater with stories of Sturgies where the thunder of Harleys mixed with the sighs of delight of the blood-red sunset in the Big Sky over fields of unharvested alfalfa ripe on the stalk swaying in the gentle breath of the full moon illuminating the eyes of lovers, where Jerry's crisp guitar rings among the stars and comets and meteors, the intergalactic harmony carried by the convergence of our bodies with the fates, to be answered by the roar of Deadheads demanding "Jerry" lost in the cosmos of disorder, no longer touching our soul, leaving us to find our way to that cool, sweet nirvana where we just might get some sleep before daylight.

Gray Goose

Even though it was three a.m. and
it was my first corrections bus ride,
I still could see the interstate road signs, so when
the guy next to me asked if we were near East L.A.,
I could tell him we weren't and wouldn't be,
but that didn't stop him from asking every five minutes
even when we were barreling up the Grapevine
at seventy-five em pee aitch
with the driver giggling maniacally as the backwash
from the bus made Jell-O of Subaru hatchbacks piloted
by weary nomads heading for their dream vacations in Yosemite
not seeing the 100 behemoths clear-cutting
the very cords of the essence of primordial life
with bright yellow munchers wheeled by seventy-foot Firestones
which I pointed out to the East L.A. man by asking him
why they were so yellow, because who would want
to swipe a seven-story machine that you could see from space,
or maybe they were that color because they came from Hertz,
but he said you're loco, man, and asked the guy across the aisle
if the pass we were flying through at eighty-five
was anywhere near his cousin's house because
he wanted to leave a message for his old lady not to visit
him this week, but the other guy's gaze was lost in
the rising sun splashing burnished reds and saffron yellows
across the pitted and barred windows through which
the now-gone woods passed,
and I noticed the pitting was from the inside, which made sense
as the officer in the back with the birdshot-loaded gun
certainly didn't have any bird-like targets among the stumps of
redwoods.

("Gray Goose" is a euphemism for the bus used to transport inmates from county jail to state prison.)

When revising this essay, I decided to write to Lou and ask him what he remembered about our study of Dickinson and, specifically, writing “SWM” and “Gray Goose.” He responded:

“I had some notes, but they got tossed during the last lockdown (‘too much stuff’). I do remember, though, what struck me about Dickinson: the element of wit. That humor was present with such concepts as immortality and expansiveness (or at least the very big). It impressed both my ear and eye. I can see why prisoners might be touched, not only because of her near-imprisonment in her father’s house, but also because of the terseness and simplicity of her writing. Concise and soft-spoken words echo readily from concrete walls.

I thought the unusual metrical variations to be freeing, especially after reading Shakespeare’s sonnets. (We had recently spent several months covering Shakespeare—not only the sonnets, but *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*.) I realized I could use the cadence of my familial tongue, impressed by the gutturals outside of English, as a poetic form.

I remember trying to write the briefest possible form: poems with only one word in each line. Then, trying to write poems where the words form a physical shape on the page. Then, turning terseness to verbosity, but maintaining some kind of rhythm.”

#652

A Prison gets to be a friend—
Between its Ponderous face
And Ours—a Kinsmanship express—
And in its narrow Eyes—

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deal us—stated as our food—
And hungered for—the same—

We learn to know the Planks—
That answer to Our feet—
So miserable a sound—at first—
Nor ever now—so sweet—

As plashing in the Pools—
When Memory was a Boy—
But a Demurer Circuit—
A Geometric Joy—

The Posture of the Key
That interrupt the Day
To Our Endeavor—Not so real
The Cheek of Liberty—

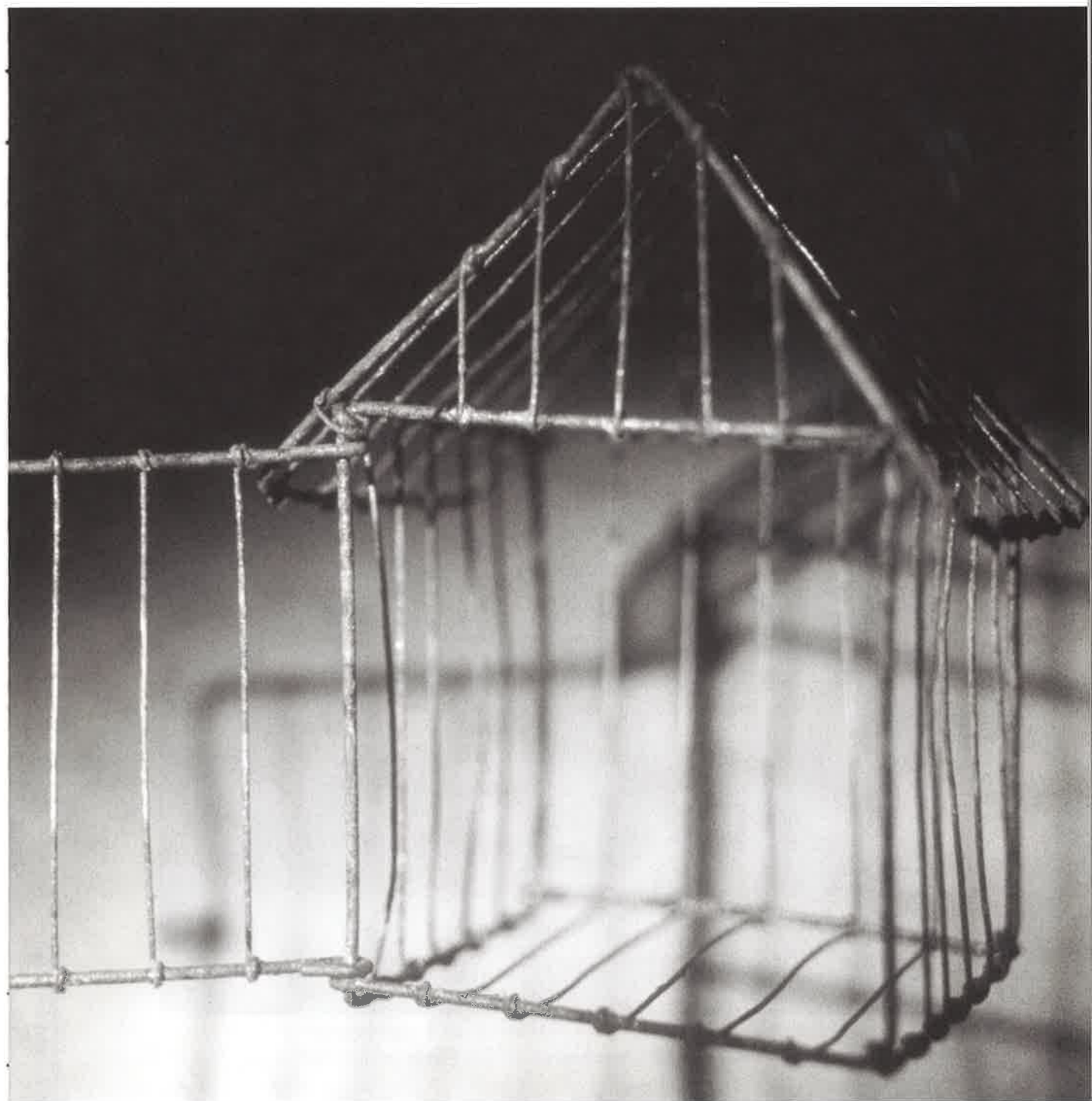
As this Phantasm Steel—
Whose features—Day and Night—
Are present to us—as Our Own—

And as escapeless—quite—

The narrow Round—the Stint—
The slow exchange of Hope—
For something passiver—Content
Too steep for looking up—

The Liberty we knew
Avoided—like a Dream—
Too wide for any Night but Heaven—
If That—indeed—redeem—

—Emily Dickinson



The Wordplay Project

In conjunction with T&W's recent bestseller, The Dictionary of Wordplay by Dave Morice, Teachers & Writers invited several contemporary American poets to celebrate the spirit of wordplay by writing poems that incorporate wordplay into their form and/or content. We encouraged the poets to peruse the Dictionary's more than 1,234 entries, then to choose from wordplay genres that have direct poetic equivalents (e.g., the homophonic poem, the acrostic, macaronic verse, and palindromic verse) or find their own ways of transforming wordplay into poems. Here are two of the results.—the Editors

A ZEUGMA BY
MARJORIE WELISH

Palpitating Object

She who was selectively labyrinthine, a song without words
in anticipation of itineraries, whereabouts
with a noun from the column below, a verb from the almanac.
Say something that works by defect, by cross-talk
something that divides and ramifies attractively, laterally,
divides and attracts a skirmish, a harvest of scree
dressed in sheep's clothing—how intriguing, how forgetful!
A song without words was day-to-day, one-on-one.

Zeugma: connecting any two parts of speech
by any other part of speech.

Zeugma: a work written with a myriad
of zeugmas.

The word comes from *zeugos*, the Greek word for "yoked." A zeugma can be serious, as in the first example below, or humorous, as in the second example:

Much he the place admired, the person more.
(Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.444)

William was going crazy and to the store.
(Dave Morice, "Going Crazy and to the Store")

AN ERNULPHUS CURSE BY
SUSAN WHEELER

The Spirits Daughters Sooth Will Drink

Grin as though you've shirked;
Equivocate your mirth.
Oh, the itch your fine re-birth
Renders not a bit less urgent!
Go and call on your protectants
Employed for the sourest work.

(What failed us that we you are brought?)

Before the wagging dishrags stop
Up your naps with silt you sought
So wormily to leave behind,
Help extricate your kind.

Ernulphus Curse: an acrostic poem written to
condemn the subject.

The most common type of acrostic is a poem in
which the initials of the lines from start to finish spell the name of the individual to whom it is
addressed. (In Wheeler's case, the name is "George W. Bush.")