

## On Contingency

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* gives as a first definition for the word “contingent,” “liable to occur but not with certainty, possible.” We live in the world of the probable and expect the sun to come up each morning. Our lives, we like to think, run along the orderly track of the probable, as if it were decreed that such and such will happen. Indeed, habit and routine create strong paths in the grass, which is one reason why it's satisfying to go to writers' conferences with their relentless schedules. If pressed, however, we will admit that it's possible that the sun will not come up tomorrow morning. The world-at-large, to say nothing of the cosmos, is, as I like to say, much bigger than our heads and the reasons our heads concoct. Anything could happen; a motto that human events regularly prove.

This may not sound like the beginning of a craft talk but I assure you it is. Part of the craft of poetry, in particular, lies in how much one feels from line to line is possible in a poem. Like everything, poems can fall into habits and routines, to say nothing of ruts, thoughtlessness, and tiresome predilections. When you write prose, every sentence should be fresh. When you write poetry, every line should be fresh. Ideally every line should be poetry in the sense that all the cylinders of poetry—sound, rhythm, line, form, connotation and denotation of each word—are working at full capacity. I stress the word “ideal.” I think it was Pound who pointed out that no poem worked fully for more than a few lines at a time. One variable or another would throw off the feel of perfection. Nevertheless, it's a goal to shoot for—a possibility.

The great question for any poet is how much possibility the poet can entertain. We know that poetry must surprise; otherwise it isn't poetry. Surprise, however, can become as programmatic as anything else. If the poet discovers some dissociative trick that seems to create surprise almost automatically, the poet is likely to hold onto that trick. The phrase “automatic writing” is a bit haunting in that regard. The

poet vacates her position of authority but knows she is doing that. Much of surrealism and its offshoots are equivocal in this regard. To me what's really interesting about possibility isn't the feel of poetry as a series of special effects, however lively and weirdly portentous, but the feel of poetry as a grappling with what could be: the unknown that the poet feels within herself, within others, and within the cosmos. Everything is contingent on the poet's feelings and sensibility. This isn't fair in the sense that the forces of authority, often patriarchal, that speak for the probable, to say nothing of the decreed, don't allow any space for the importance of such subjectivity. Or they actively disparage it: "women and their feelings" is a phrase that has echoed down the corridors of time.

There is the belief in modern times that the power of the individual will is something like unlimited. If you want it, you can do it. The net of circumstances that defines any life, the fall into the grip of historical time, may, however, not agree with the individual will at all. It may seem, if anything, to mock it. You can entertain possibility in your head but that may be as far as matters go. If you think you are going to overthrow some established idol, or even get out of a hard personal situation, you may be indulging in nothing more than being wishful. "That's the way it is," thus the advice more than one parent has passed onto her or his progeny. That this is taken for wisdom is an unhappy reflection on the too common poverty of human imagination.

Poems exist, however, to indulge possibility. A poem begins with an opening line and there is, strictly speaking, no telling where that line will go. "Way leads onto way" as Robert Frost put it. After the poet has written a few lines, the ways start to narrow, however. Decisions are made by the poet to go here not there. Habits and predilections kick in. So does life experience to the varying degree the poet feels she is being reportorial. If however, the poet has a strong sense of the provisional nature of writing poems; if the poet has a strong sense of grappling line-by-line with various verities that may not be verities; if the poet has a strong sense of putting her imprint on form and using form to her ends; if the poet has a strong sense of inwardness that will make her query each line's purpose; if the poet sees each line dangling over the metaphysical abyss; if the poet has a strong sense of whimsy so that nothing

is strictly given no matter how much the world tells her so. But there is no more need for ifs. I am referring to Emily Dickinson, that one in a very large million, that spirit teacher, and, as Ginsberg wrote of Whitman, that courage teacher.

When I teach Dickinson I don't hand out her poems. I dictate the first line of the poem and stop right there. Typically it takes a half-hour, sometimes longer, to suss out that first line. It's not that we grasp its meaning. Her first lines are often gambits that open up vistas and make references that can't possibly be toted up. She is not so much setting out on a specific path as throwing open the door to a mode of supposition and feeling that seems more or less infinite. At the same time, she is setting up a dialogue between herself and whatever has piqued her interest or invited her commentary. Each of the poems is a small drama that is vast. There is an engagement that is active. The poem as it proceeds is alive from line to line and describes a sort of gradually accruing sketch in the mental air it inhabits. There is nothing of what we would call description, a mode that posits that things stay in their place. For Dickinson everything depends on her and therefore nothing need stay in place. A poem, after all, is an act of imagination that acknowledges the contingent nature of existence rather than an act of what today we might call sensitive journalism in a lineated form. The poet is someone who conjures rather than describes and a poem is an act of conjuring.

One of the essential questions poetry asks is what does one thing have to do with another? It's a basic human question that children start asking more or less right away. That's understandable: there's a lot in the world to more or less try to make sense of. The question leads, if the poet is open, to a feeling for the contingent in the sense that one thought/feeling/memory/fancy/intuition is bound to bring up another. Everything is contingent in the sense of being possible, but also in the sense of one thing depending on another as when we say "contingent upon the completion of this or that." Contingency leads us to the indefinite—what is possible—and the definite—what is connected. Part of Dickinson's genius is to consistently engage both aspects of contingency. She isn't a poet of mere fancy—what used to be typed as female whim—nor is she a poet of simple narrative—the straightforward ballad. She has

a feeling for how our connectedness as human beings is integral to who we are. At the same time, she has a feeling for the enormity of feeling within her and how she must honor that feeling in her poetry if she is to live. Though biography often portrays Dickinson as the odd one out, the issue is what are so-called normal others doing as they go through life ignoring the moody sea within them. The matter is much like Thoreau's being jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax that he believed supported the Mexican-American war. He felt the war to be unjust and civil disobedience a just response. To his mind, conscience and imagination went together. If disobedience was necessary then it was necessary. Dickinson was, among other things, disobedient. Although, the New England habit of inward scrutiny easily became circumscribed by prescribed notions of propriety, the New England habit also produced the likes of Dickinson, Thoreau, Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, to name a handful, who set the course of American literature. All were radical, not in a leftist sense, but in the sense of honoring the strength of individual conviction.

Thus in Dickinson's poems we have a powerful example of how from line to line a feeling for the radical contingency of life and poetry can come together to wake us up to how complex yet open-ended the web of circumstances may be that we find ourselves in, how vital abstractions may be and how abstract and less than certain the things we take for granted may be. First and last, Dickinson was a vitalist, one who felt the pulse of everything. This plays out in her poems through rhythm, punctuation, diction, syntax, and word choice, to name a few of the issues one expects in a craft talk. Poetry is an embodiment, the words and lines form an active whole. Dickinson grasped that in her soul.

I use the word "soul" in particular. I believe that what is occurring in Dickinson is a movement from the strictly theological sense of the word, that immortal part of the person that is the divine imprint and thus the possible ticket to the everlasting, to the feeling of the indefinite yet powerful spirit that distinguishes any person, the magical harbor of inwardness, and that is accordingly precious. Soul and imagination are intertwined; the work of one influences the work of the other. Both resist the forces of definition; both abet the provisional processes that art is fond of. Both testify to what is unsaid and

unseen. Both are comfortable with mystery.

When we read a Dickinson poem we inevitably are going to go too fast. Each line is a sort of consideration that exists in its own right and that advances the particular narrative Dickinson is improvising. Each line uses words in a denotative, dictionary fashion but also uses words in a very connotative fashion so that the auras of the words are let loose. I almost wrote “auroras” of the words here, thinking of Wallace Stevens, because that word would apply also. The words are like that, leading one along. We expect a poet to manifest great sensitivity to language but in Dickinson's case the sensitivity is phenomenal. The words in her poems possess a gorgeous physicality that almost turns them into little kinetic sculptures. Certainly the poems have that kinetic quality: so much is going on simultaneously.

Before I look at one of her poems with you I want to stress that she embodies a particular form of American art, one based on democratic encounter. One of the hallmarks of democracy is equality and the concomitant power that resists in encounters with other people as one's equals and with the world-at-large. Aligned with that power is the Protestant habit of looking for signs in the world around a person, what was called God's providence. God's hand was present in the creation and never left. Each person could read those signs. This confluence has been witnessed by numerous American poets who may vary in style but very much are based on the power of encounter. I've chosen Frost and Plath to focus on as other examples of the American penchant for improvising meaning by teasing meaning out of circumstances while recognizing the power of the self while evoking the power of what isn't the self. If that sounds somewhat complex, it is. It's particularly complex in Dickinson's case because she is inventing the circumstances. Nothing is given. Frost leans on the natural world and Plath leans on her personal life, both of which are perfectly appropriate places to lean, and where, no doubt, many of the poets in this audience lean, but Dickinson is leaning on the cosmos.