

**MY FIRST EMILY
OR: HOPE IS THE THING WITH
FEATHERS THAT SQUAWKS FROM
THE ROOF OF MY GARDEN SHED
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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

I am so not an ornithologist.

I observe. I collect firsts, mostly birds, poets, too. I know, that's a bit of an odd hobby, but I do like a celebrity. My tiny council house garden full of them, any time of day or year. This is where greatness happens, serendipity, right next to the compost bin. I'll show you round! Just give me a wee moment. Got to hang up my washing while it's dry outside.

Fancy a little gossip?

There's a couple of bullfinches nesting in my conifer. Their relationship status: tetchy at best. Let's say: complicated. Work in progress. I am learning a lot of 'how not to' whenever I pass the awkward scene of domestic un-bliss. Mrs Bullfinch is not a happy bunny today. She says things like: 'grrr-woo, grrr-woo' and we all know what that means, excuse the expletives!

Mr Bullfinch has just been chucked out. This time, I guess, it's for good.

Hold on -

'Gag-GAG-gaaaag'. A screech. A squeal. A shriek. That bird! Do you hear that?

'Au-kyee-kau-kau-kau' – the broken tooth of truth. What a cull! What a gull!

And yes, I agree, you couldn't state this any clearer.

Emily Dickinson squawks from my garden shed roof, makes me drop a peg, a sock, the lot.

Wait!

I'll get my notebook, a pencil. Must jot this epiphany down while she's at it. While she's here. Fresh-faced. Sheer brilliance, that lady! I recognise perfection and I'm not really sure that I like what she says. In fact, I'm sure that I don't! Still: I hear her. I see her, eye to eye, she, this massive revelation of everything under the sun. Loud and noisy. Self-assured. I'm a little confused about her style. Also, nervous. Is it a rap? An avant garde breakdance? Will I be required to join in? Am I even qualified?

Don't judge!

Amateur, my chosen tag. Amateur non-ornithologist, aka: definitely not-a-birder, but I love, love, love this performance. That's what poetry does. Emily knows what she's doing. Sign of a true professional. She commands the roof, and there's movements to go with her clarity. A swank, a swagger, a sashay, a stride. Her cloud white core glides along the black bitumen, then she stops in mock disgust at the top right hand corner, where the flat sheet of shingles warps just a teensy, tiny bit. She's not pleased with this sub-standard rostrum! Gives me the look. I should have prepped her stage applying due care and attention.

'Kyow. Kyow. Kyow.'

She's not the shy wallflower people expect, that's for sure!

In case you missed it: There's a herring gull strutting her stuff on the roof of my old garden shed, clearly screeching uncomfortable truths from the bottom of her soul, gags it all up like drunken Friday night vomit.

'Gag-gag-gag'.

Oh, verity! Sincerity! It's all happening, dash – dash – dash, would you believe it? Morse code! She even speaks in punctuation, that's a phenomenal skill! Not all creatures have mastered the comma! She's unique! A predator, scavenger, goddess - and her delivery, awe-inspiring. Raw! Gull gullet raw!

The long sleeves of my upside down t-shirt flutter in approval.

'Au-kyee-kau-kau-kau-Au-kyee-kau-kau-kau'.

I blink. And, would you believe it, she's gone!

A pair of sleek black trouser legs wave her goodbye in the breeze, then dangle. A limp, damp flap, flap, flap.

Please, come back!

She does, albeit briefly. She returns from her errand with a prize. Must have spotted that chunk of a chip through the thicket behind the fence posts. Too good to pass. True Glaswegian, that one! Who would have known?

'Gag-gag-gag'. What next? The suspense is killing me!

Solemn stillness!

Brevity and pause. So poised. All deliberate. Emily does not waffle or beat around the bush. I admire her strength of voice, no matter what, even when choking on a stale, grubby chip from the shop down the road. That rancid cold stick, stuck in her throat and still, she enunciates! No time to waste. This, a woman with a mission. Assertive, even through deepest discomfort and pain. Every sound, important, especially the silences.

Eye to eye again, I am waiting for more wisdom.

‘Gag-gag-gag. Au-kyee-kau-kau-kau.’

She stands tall. Points her beak, that blood-red spot of bother. Her pearly white screech, never pleasant, goes through soul and bone as though they’re merely butter, melting into my vital organs and she knows. I hear her.

Oh, I hear her.

‘Hope is that thing with feathers’ – she squawks and I understand.

For the first time, I get it. Five decades late. This is not the message of a cute wee song bird little girl. I have often imagined Emily, in her room, writing letters, a tranquil existence in a quiet home. How wrong was I! Takes the screechy, stubborn shriek of a cross herring gull to croak sense into my world.

This Emily Dickinson doesn’t want to be liked. Doesn’t strive to be anything other than honest. She’s no chiffchaff ruffraff, endlessly repeating her name throughout the seasons. Not a sweet, catchy tweeter of bitesize columns, in fifty pleasing sounds or less. Instead, she says, what needs to be said to an audience of none, or one, or other and doesn’t expect anything in return. She hollers, squeals, howls her piece, is all. And then... she leaves.

Emily doesn’t need my bird feeders. They’re for the little ones, the pretty ones, and poor Mr Bullfich, so recently divorced and not quite able to look after himself yet.

Look! Another gull’s just landed on my garden shed roof. Another storyteller. Brilliant!

‘Gag-gag-gag. Gag-gaaag-gag-gaaag-gag’. Somehow new, and strangely familiar.

Wait a minute! I think this is my first Kylie!

I’m smiling. I’m tapping. I’m singing along: ‘I just can’t get you out of my head’.

Mrs Bullfinch hops on to my washing line to get a better view of the stage. My topsy-turvy clothes and I, quite the disco queens. Wanna join?

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