**As imperceptibly as grief – Emily Dickinson**

As imperceptibly as grief
  The summer lapsed away, —
  Too imperceptible, at last,
  To seem like perfidy.
  A quietness distilled,
  As twilight long begun,
  Or Nature, spending with herself
  Sequestered afternoon.
  The dusk drew earlier in,
  The morning foreign shone, —
  A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
  As guest who would be gone.

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

To start, what about that first simile? Summer does creep imperceptibly away. As does grief. But the lessening of grief is a relief—days later we realize we haven’t cried for our lost one.  But the creeping away of summer causes a form of grief for the speaker, so the simile is a bit odd.  The leaving is the same, yes, but one absence is comfort and the other is not.

Then look at the next choices.  “The Summer” is this past particular one, in the past tense where the poem is located (not “a summer”), but not yet, as it later becomes, “our summer.” The verb “lapsed” also works in surprising ways.  I misremember this line always as “The Summer slipped away.”  But lapsed is so much the better choice, meaning as it does “to fall away by degree” and also a fall from grace.  Grace, like “our summer”, will appear much later in the poem. (Not to mention that “lapsed” is sonically more surprising and interesting than the alliterative “slipped” would be; lapsed keeps the “s” sound but pushes it to the middle.)

This slipping, the speaker tells us, was so imperceptible that it couldn’t be a form of betrayal, of “perfidy.” And then she faces the difficult task of describing something she has claimed is imperceptible. If it can’t be sensed or understood, how can it be described? The poem really could be broken into four four-line stanzas.  The middle two stanzas are where Dickinson takes on the task of describing the passing of time. “Twilight” begins earlier, “dusk” draws “earlier in”.  Such changes are by degree and are subtle; the natural world often moves in time too slow for the human mind to catch it. Only later do we realize the season has shifted. And by that point, it feels a bit like betrayal.

The summer has been a guest, and guests must eventually leave. Her leaving couldn’t really be a surprise.  But even so, somehow there is something “harrowing” about the “Grace” that, like a guest,  “would be gone.”  What might a harrowing grace be? A distressing beauty? A troubled divine love? And summer has become female and ours (“our summer”), personifying and personalizing the loss even more.

The last stanza doesn’t resolve these questions but turns away from them. Summer is perceptible, if her leaving is not, and even without a clear means of transport, she still makes her escape—though it is “light”—into the “beautiful.”

I would never claim to know what Dickinson might have meant by anything, and I am bold in claiming her as a favored, strange auntie. But I understand these last lines somewhere near my solar plexus.  We can’t help feeling grief for summer’s passing—for time’s passing—but we also must recognize that such passage provides light and beauty.  Even when our hearts protest.

"As imperceptibly as Grief' (1540) is often compared to "There's a certain Slant of light" as another poem in which seasonal change becomes a symbol of inner change. The relationship of inner and outer here, however, is somewhat different. "There's a certain Slant" begins with a moment of arrest that signals the nature and meaning of winter. This poem tells us that summer has passed but insists that this passing occurred so slowly that it did not seem like the betrayal that it really was. The comparison to the slow fading of grief also implies a failure of awareness on the speaker's part. The second and third lines begin a description of a transitional period, and their claim that the speaker felt no betrayal shows that she has had to struggle against such a feeling. The next eight lines create a personified scene of late summer or early autumn. The distilled quiet allows time for contemplation. The "twilight long begun" suggests that the speaker is getting used to the coming season and is aware that change was occurring before she truly noticed it. These lines reinforce the poem's initial description of a slow lapse and also convey the idea that foreknowledge of decline is part of the human condition. The personification of the polite but coldly determined guest who insists on leaving no matter how earnestly she is asked to stay is convincing on the realistic level. On the level of analogy, the courtesy probably corresponds to the restrained beauty of the season, and the cold determination corresponds to the inevitability of the year's cycle.

The movement from identification with sequestered nature to nature as a departing figure communicates the involvement of humans in the seasonal life cycle. The last four lines shift the metaphor and relax the tension. Summer leaves by secret means. The missing wing and keel suggest a mysterious fluidity — greater than that of air or water. Summer escapes into the beautiful, which is a repository of creation that promises to send more beauty into the world. The balanced picture of the departing guest has prepared us for this low-key conclusion.