

Emily as a student at Mount Holyoke Seminary.
Photo taken in late 1847 or early 1848.
(Photo courtesy Amherst College Library.)

ONE BIRD - ONE CAGE - ONE FLIGHT

Homage to Emily Dickinson

by
ROGER WHITE

One is a dainty sum! One bird, one cage, one flight;
one song in those far woods, as yet suspected by
faith only!

Emily Dickinson

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FOR THE BELLE OF AMHERST

and all my Emilys

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE FAMILY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These poems in homage to Emily Dickinson were suggested by themes and images in her letters. Although their writing brought its own recompense of pleasure, I shall feel doubly rewarded if they awaken in the reader a virgin or renewed interest in the life and art of a great poet whose unsurpassed gift of articulating the spiritual promptings and misgivings that characterize the human condition will surely recommend her afresh to each succeeding generation as a contemporary.

EDWARD DICKINSON 1803-1874

Edward Dickinson was born in Amherst, a quiet village in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts about 100 miles from Cambridge and Concord and, at that time, lacking considerably their pace and sophistication. He was a patriarch of the Puritan tradition—dominant, stern, remote and awesome. His heart was “pure and terrible,” Emily said and on Sundays he read “lonely and rigorous books”; but he was never heard to “utter a harsh word” and he commanded the respect and affection of his wife and children to the end. He died on June 16, 1874, while visiting Boston. He was the leading lawyer of Amherst and in later life treasurer of Amherst College and a member of the legislature and of Congress. His daughter, Lavinia, it was reported, said of him, “Father never kissed us goodnight in our lives. He would have died for us, but he would have died before he would let us know it.”

EMILY (NORCROSS) DICKINSON 1804-1882

Before her marriage to Edward Dickinson on May 6, 1828, Emily Norcross lived in Monson, Massachusetts. After their marriage they lived on Main Street in Amherst in “one of those large, square brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns, surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs without, and within exquisitely neat, cool, spacious, and fragrant with flowers,” as one visitor recorded. The house was the perfect setting for this gentle soft-spoken woman who devoted herself to her husband and children. Between 1840 and 1855 the family lived in a dwelling on Pleasant Street in Amherst, but in October of 1855 moved back to the family homestead on Main Street. Mrs. Dickinson suffered a stroke in 1875—her world having fallen apart with the death of her husband the previous year—and was a partial invalid until her death in 1882. She was nursed with fidelity during those years by her daughter, Emily.

WILLIAM AUSTIN DICKINSON 1829-1895

Austin, the first child of the marriage of Edward and Emily Dickinson, was born on April 16, 1829. He taught school in Boston (1851-52), went on to study law at Harvard, and practiced in Amherst, where he spent the rest of his life. After his marriage to Susan Gilbert in Geneva, New York, on July 1, 1856, he settled with his bride in a newly-built home next to the family homestead on Main Street. Three children were born: Ned, Martha and Thomas.

Austin's father, at one point, compared the letters his son wrote from Harvard to the writing of Shakespeare and contemplated publishing them because of their literary merit. There is no existing description of family approval being accorded to the writing of Emily Dickinson; indeed, she concealed the main body of her work from her family and appears to have shown them only her light and occasional poems. Austin died in 1895; Susan, in 1913.

EMILY ELIZABETH DICKINSON 1830-1886

Emily was born on December 10, 1830. As a child she was much in awe of her father, but was devoted throughout her life to both her parents. She attended Amherst Academy for seven years, graduating in 1847, and spent one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts. In the years following 1848, she settled down to the customary life of a New England village. She had been the wit of her class and well liked. A school friend remembers her as "not beautiful, yet she had great beauties. Her eyes were lovely auburn, soft and warm, her hair lay in rings of the same colour all over her head, and her skin and teeth were fine." One who met her in later life found her "a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, "like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass," and with smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nunlike look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order . . ." and she spoke "under her breath, in childlike fashion." There was, he said, "no trace of affectation" in her manner, and he confessed that he found her a total "enigma."

Her life was uneventful—visits to Boston, Cambridge and Worcester in 1844; a visit with relatives in Boston in 1845 and 1851; a brief stay in Washington and Philadelphia in 1854; and,

in 1864, visits to Boston for medical treatment for her eyes. In contrast to the placid exterior existence she led stand her poems which reflect an inner world of tumult, exaltation and intense creativity. In June 1884 she suffered a nervous collapse—death, she said, had wronged her by its too frequent visitations.

Even as a child Emily Dickinson felt estranged from religion as she saw it expressed and experienced around her. In the spring of 1846, when a religious revival swept through Amherst, she remarked, "the small circle who met for prayer missed me from their number." She was then fifteen. She gave vent to her little heresies in letters to friends throughout her life, remarking on one occasion, "I wish the 'faith of the fathers' didn't wear brogans and carry blue umbrellas," and frequently indulging in open scorn of cherished doctrines.

In her mid-twenties Emily Dickinson rebelled against the orthodoxy of her church, and although she would sometimes attend meetings, she withdrew membership to pursue her spiritual life on her own terms. It is thought that the tightly-structured metres and stanzas she used in her verse were influenced by the quatrains of the hymnal with which she was familiar. The themes of both her poems and her letters are, as her critics have pointed out, those ancient ones of which significant poetry is fashioned: the ecstasy of faith, the doubts which assail one who would believe, the struggle of the soul to understand its pain and growth, death, the anguish of parting, the lure of eternity. Her soul was all things to her—inspirator, friend, counsellor, elusive lover and the essential focus of her attention. She is, *par excellence*, the poet of the inner country, the landscape of the soul, the central tension governing her work being "the light of reunion and the fire of separation."¹ Her letters, no less than her poems, place her in the tradition of self-awareness, and reveal that their author is inescapably and instinctively a poet: scattered among descriptions of the weather, scraps of village gossip and reports of the small events which comprised her day are phrases and aphorisms which leap toward one claiming attention. "My business is circumference," she might suddenly remark in an otherwise pedestrian passage.

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of Maqṣūd*

LAVINIA DICKINSON 1833-1899

Increasingly, Emily Dickinson withdrew from village activities, gradually ceased to leave home at all, and eventually became virtually a recluse in her father's house. Until her death on May 15, 1886, of a condition diagnosed as Bright's disease she did, however, remain solicitous of village life and maintained contact, in person and through correspondence, with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. During the last years of her life she was, to many in the village, only that dim figure they glimpsed flitting about the garden, clad always in white; she was thought to have been thwarted in love, or mad. Here was the seed that later bloomed into the romantic legend of Emily Dickinson, one which for so long a period threatened to overshadow her achievement as a great poet and delay her deserved recognition. Her output was extraordinary. Although only seven of her poems were published in her lifetime—some anonymously and edited without consent—a total of 1,775 were discovered in a bureau drawer after her death. Her posthumous fame began with the gradual publication of her poems in editions between 1890 and 1955. Her manuscripts were purchased in 1950 by Gilbert H. Montague who presented them to the Harvard College Library. A workable edition of her output became available when Thomas H. Johnson published her poems in three volumes (1955) and her letters in three volumes (1958) for Harvard University. These publications made possible more serious study of her accomplishment but have done little to enable critics to solve the enigma of Miss Dickinson or penetrate her inviolable privacy. Serious students and admirers of Emily Dickinson should avail themselves of the opportunity of reading George Frisbie Whicher's *This Was a Poet* (1938); the Harvard edition of the *Poems*, edited by T. H. Johnson (1955); the Harvard edition of the *Letters*, edited by T. H. Johnson and Mrs. Theodora Ward (1958); Jay Leyda's helpful *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (Archon ed. 1970); and Richard B. Sewall's superlative *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974, 1980). Inder Nath Kher's insightful *The Landscape of Absence* (1974) sheds light on the poems. A new wave of scholarly work is in preparation or has just been released. Emily Dickinson is, in Mr. Sewall's telling tribute, "inexhaustible." Some scholars are convinced that Emily was aware of her own genius and arranged her life to meet its demands.

Emily's sister was born on February 28, 1833, the "baby of the family." The girls were close friends all their lives, but Lavinia did not enjoy Emily's full confidence, as evidenced by her astonishment in coming across a cache of Emily's poems after her sister's death. Her range of interests, as reflected in Emily's letters, seems to have been confined (in Emily's comment) to her "pussies and posies," though brother Austin remarked that she could "raise an awful breeze"—a reference to her sharp tongue and peppery spirit. Like Emily, "Vinnie" or "Vinnia" did not marry, and she remained in her father's home until her death in 1899. After Emily's death, and by her sister's direction, Lavinia destroyed all of the correspondence received by Emily. Had it survived many of the questions which now tantalize scholars might have found answers.

MARGARET MAHER - "MAGGIE"

Margaret "Maggie" Maher was born in Parish Kilusty in Tipperary and came to the United States in that flood of immigrants who entered in the latter half of the nineteenth century. She was over twenty when she came into the service of the Dickinson family in March 1869 and remained until the end, becoming the pivot and mainstay of the household. Her correspondence with a former employer, Clarinda Boltwood, miraculously survived and both her letters and those of Emily Dickinson indicate that friendship and respect flowered between the two women. Emily tirelessly sang her praises in her letters to friends, describing her as the "North Wind of the family—warm and wild and mighty." She became a buffer between Emily and the world, being called upon to slip letters clandestinely under Emily's door in periods of seclusion, and to rid the house of unexpected callers by presenting them with Miss Emily's excuses and gifts of flowers.

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

When Emily Dickinson's poems first attracted attention and enthusiastic admiration, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) was assigned the role of the villain of the piece, it being charged that in introducing her work to the public he doctored and

mutilated it in order to win acceptance for it among a public with a taste for valentine verse. Later study, it has been suggested, indicates that he performed a useful service in hastening her acceptance and recognition and that his editing facilitated an understanding of her work. In any event, he was a kind, intelligent and honorable man whose motives were above reproach. The author in the present work has a little fun at Higginson's expense but pleads poetic license in using him as a symbol of all that is gray, stiflingly ordinary and disastrously well-intentioned—the very epitome of conventions which Emily Dickinson was striking out against in her poems and her interior life. One remembers her scorn of "dimity convictions!" Her private view of Higginson she discreetly left unexpressed.

Higginson was a Unitarian clergyman, the colonel of a Negro regiment in the Civil War, and an editor and critic with the *Atlantic Monthly*. He represented the standards of genteel literary taste which then prevailed. He was one of the few persons outside the family—the writer Helen Hunt Jackson was another—to whom Emily showed her work, but even her family had no idea of its volume. She wrote to him in 1862 asking if he thought her verse was "alive." This was her attempt to reach out to the world for editorial opinion. She drew her conclusions from his reply and although she maintained correspondence with Higginson for a number of years and continued to show him poems, now and again, the urgency was gone: she recognized that the literary world he represented was closed to her.

Higginson found her quaint, enigmatic and startling, but developed an affection for his erratic correspondent and recognized immediately that her gift was unique. He visited her in 1870 and again in 1873, and after her death published an account of his visit in the *Atlantic*. The preference of that time was for decorous, bland, moralizing, exhortatory poetry, and although Higginson recognized her native genius, it was beyond his range of appreciation. He was much troubled by her crudity of diction, disquieted by her subject matter and alarmed by her "fractures of grammar and dictionary." She remained an enigma to him from beginning to end. His account of his first visit with her is very valuable, and reveals the chasm between the arbiter of literary fashion and the Amherst poet: they lived in different worlds. Her "immortal wine," it might be said, was too heady for the parson accustomed to cambric tea.

EMILY'S SUITORS

THE LAW STUDENT

Benjamin Franklin Newton was a young law student who worked for a time (1847 to 1849) in her father's law office. He shared books and thoughts with Emily Dickinson and became (in Emily's words) her "gentle, grave Preceptor" possessing "an intellect far surpassing [her] own" and thought of as a dearly-loved "elder brother." He left Amherst to set up his own practice and not long afterwards died of tuberculosis. He is thought to be the one Emily described in a letter to Higginson as the friend who "ventured too near immortality and never returned." A romance might be inferred, but this is generally considered to be inconclusive.

THE REV. CHARLES WADSWORTH

Emily Dickinson met the Rev. Charles Wadsworth when she was twenty-five, during a visit to Washington where her father was serving as a Congressman. Wadsworth was in his late forties—successful, attractive, a minister of religion. It is possible to consider him as the major figure in her emotional life, the man to whom she gave her heart fully. It is thought that Wadsworth is the one referred to when Emily described to Higginson a friend "who was not content that I be his scholar—so he left the land." Some commentators suggest that the Rev. Wadsworth was the element in Emily Dickinson's life which triggered her great creative outburst during the 1860's; in 1862 alone she wrote 356 poems.

JUDGE OTIS P. LORD

After 1862, Judge Otis P. Lord of Salem, a widower in his late sixties and an old friend of the Dickinson family, often visited Amherst. Drafts of fifteen of Emily's letters written between 1878 and 1883 have given rise to the not unfounded speculation that she conceived strong feelings of love for him and perhaps even desired marriage.

SOME CORRESPONDENTS

Samuel and Mary Bowles: Old and valued family friends. Bowles edited the *Springfield Republican*.

Joseph K. Chickering: A teacher of English at Amherst College.

James D. Clark: On Wadsworth's death in 1882, Emily Dickinson exchanged with his friend, James Clark, memories of their mutual friend, and later with his brother, Charles Clark.

Perez Dickinson Cowan: A school friend of Emily's at Amherst College who entered the ministry.

Josiah and Elizabeth Holland: Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland were among Emily's closest friends. Dr. Holland was on the staff of the *Springfield Republican* and went on to become editor of *Scribner's Monthly*.

Louise and Fannie Norcross: Cousins of Emily Dickinson with whom she maintained close bonds all her life.

Abiah Root: A school friend of Emily's with whom she corresponded frequently until Abiah's marriage.

Mrs. Edward Tuckerman: Wife of the professor of botany at Amherst College.

Kate Turner: A friend with whom she corresponded between 1859 and 1866.

Maria Whitney: A Dickinson family friend who lived at Northampton.

Abby Wood: A school friend who married a missionary, the Reverend Daniel Bliss, with whom she went to Beirut and there helped him found the Syrian Protestant College (later known as the American University of Beirut) which was attended by Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. Elsewhere I have drawn attention to the fact that Emily Dickinson was a contemporary of the heroic Tāhirih (1817-1852), Persian poet and martyr. For those who muse over patterns it should be recorded here that Mount Holyoke, attended by Emily, was the recipient of a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, dated July 24, 1919. See *United States Bahá'í News*, September 1973, p. 19.

*In the Lord put I my trust:
how say ye to my soul, Flee
as a bird to your mountain!*

Psalms 11:1

What shall we do, my darling, when trial grows more and more,
when the dim, lone light expires, and it's dark, so very
dark, and we wander, and know not where, and cannot get
out of the forest — whose is the hand to help us, and to
lead, and forever guide us; they talk of a "Jesus of
Nazareth" — will you tell me if it be he?

Emily Dickinson



PART ONE:

SPRING SONG 1841-1859

*O Children of Negligence! Set not your
affections on mortal sovereignty and
rejoice not therein. Ye are even as
the unwary bird that with full
confidence warbleth upon the bough;
till of a sudden the fowler Death
throws it upon the dust, and the
melody, the form and the colour are
gone, leaving not a trace. Wherefore
take heed, O bondslaves of desire!*

Bahá'u'lláh

SPRING SONG

My hope put out white petals
In tentative delight
But twice there came concussive frost,
Obliterating blight

Which, blotting out my April,
Stirred wisdom in my root.
Should another burgeoning come
Will twig renew? 'Tis moot.

CHANT

I chant the words that comfort me —
Bird and peach and hills and tree —
And skimming through the garden chime
Sounds and syllables I'd make mine.
Some words bubble on my lips —
Gentian, damson, water, ships —
And some from deeper source are sprung
Whose taste is holy on my tongue,
Words that tell the all of me —
Flight and immortality —
Countering those which catch the breath:
Shadow, darkness, ice and death.

MAY ONE WALTZ?

Amherst College
May 7, 1845

Dear Abiah,

How large they sound, the studies here,
Botany and Latin!
Need one be prim to study them?
May one still waltz in satin?

Have you a herbarium
As most the girls here do?
Are you, like me, acclaimed school wit? —
A station one might rue!

The belle of Amherst I shall be
When I am seventeen —
Disdainful of admirers,
A veritable queen!

When next we meet I hope you'll find
Your Emily somewhat wiser;
If not, I trust you'll have the sense
Politely to advise her.

A letter would be welcome, dear,
And, oh! before I end —
Enclosed is a geranium leaf,
Please press it for your friend,

Emily
(age 14)

BREAD

Mother thinks me not able to confine myself to school this term. She had rather I would exercise, and I can assure you I get plenty of that article by staying at home. I am going to learn to make bread tomorrow. So you may imagine me with my sleeves rolled up, mixing flour, milk, saleratus, etc., with a deal of grace . . .

Emily Dickinson

... her father demanded that she be the sole author of all his bread...

Jay Leyda

Amherst, 1845

Dear Abiah,

My brow is moist, I bite my lips,
I flaunt domestic scars;
A badge of flour decks my cheek
As Meg's or Kate's, and mars

My fourteen years of dignity
As tranquilly I reigned,
A secluded parlour scholar
Who drudgery disdained.

A kitchen hour swept away
My carefree sovereignty,
And where's the yeast to puff again
My former majesty?

What kneading will our lives sustain —
What flame or blaze embrace
Till judge awards approving smile
As now lights mother's face?

But oh! the crust is tawny
And proudly I admire;
Were resurrection so assured
Who'd fail to brave the fire?

Your Affectionate Emily

THE PRISONER

... many an hour has fled with its report to heaven, and what has been the tale of me?

Emily Dickinson

... if the anguish of others helped one with one's own, now would be many medicines.

Emily Dickinson

I am in bondage to my bones!
My spirit raised a shout,
But all negotiation failed
To bring the captive out.

No resolution yet is found
Despite the urgent cry.
Release me! pleads the prisoner,
Say bones: *But then we die!*

No cunning plan the spirit weaves —
Now pining, tortured, thin —
Overthrows bones' tyranny
By mutiny within.

A meteor's rash leap by night
Or azure glimpsed through bars
Encourages the sore inmate
To stride across the stars.

Long has the chafing struggle raged
And God alone can know
When might the captive, fervour gained,
Slip his lax chains and go.

HOME, SWEET HOME

When we contemplate Emily Dickinson, we cannot fail to be struck by the contrast between her calm, eventless outward existence, and the titanic struggles going on within.

John Wain

Dear Abiah . . . We all went home on Wednesday before Thanksgiving . . . Never did Amherst look more lovely to me, and gratitude rose in my heart to God, for granting me such a safe return to my *own dear home* . . . all were at the door to welcome the returned one. . . . Oh, Abiah, it was the first meeting, as it had been the first separation, and it was a joyful one to all of us. . . . Slowly and sadly dragged a few of the days after my return to the Seminary, and I was very homesick, but . . . my sorrows were soon lost in study, and I again felt happy, if happiness there can be away from "home, sweet home."

Emily Dickinson

No insurrection mars the calm
In which we glide about
Like somnambulant leviathans
Whose temper none will doubt.

We serenely pass and circumvent,
A fixed course marked for each,
But I have dreamed an atmosphere
Beyond whale's ken or reach —

A stratosphere where leaping fish
Would parry, flash and dart
And spark from their vitality
The force that suns impart

And careening as hot meteors,
If writhing creatures met,
Collision strikes them into flame
For love could not be wet.

But docilely I loll in murk
Where minnow must remain
And if I called these waters love
I knew no other name.

VALENTINE

Every night have I looked, and yet in vain, for one of Cupid's messengers. Many of the girls have received very beautiful valentines; and I have not and had been hoping for one . . . I am pining for a valentine.

Emily Dickinson

Mount Holeyoke Female Seminary
South Hadley
February 1848

That I shall claim your face once more!
If heaven offered nothing more
Love's reverent labour I'd perfect
Till there its image I'd detect;
Witless, hapless, overjoyed,
Delighting I'd been so employed
In life's benevolent career
To seek and find and choose the dear —
Task unheard, unsung as flowers'
Yet highest use of earth's short hours —
Sweet choice by Providence afforded
Overflowingly rewarded;
All paradise profoundly awed
By visage only beauty flawed,
Angels in hushed consternation
Watching God smile approbation.
Till heaven's gained, I am content
To memorize emolument.

GRADUATION

[Emily Dickinson] is the poet of the inscrutable necessity which we endure. . . . In her best poems, those that deal directly and boldly with suffering and death, she is governed by the sublime.

Daniel G. Hoffman

Attentive is the scholar
That Master, pain, instructs;
A vivid erudition
His tutelage inducts.

The standard set on Calvary
Informs curriculum —
So imperial a knowledge
As strikes the pupil dumb.

Examination's agony
Brings student sharpest ruth
If sought promotion slips his grasp —
Attainment, Beauty, Truth.

PRAYER

Mother is still an invalid . . . father and Austin still clamour for food; and I, like a martyr, am feeding them . . . looking around my kitchen, and praying for kind deliverance. . . . My kitchen, I think I said. God forbid that it was or should be my own—God keep me from what they call *households*, except that bright one of "faith!"

Emily Dickinson

Deliver me from cooking-stoves,
From kitchens, pots and pans;
The only menu I select
Is that which heaven plans.

Release me from the laundry tub,
The martyred clothes on line;
Let imperishable garment,
Unsoiled and white be mine.

I take no pride in baking bread,
The golden loaf a vision;
I ask higher resurrection,
The leavened soul risen.

Spare this maid assault of steam
Who pleads for distillation
And seeks for fruits she puts away
Eternal preservation.

Dash not the crockery of her hopes
But grant long use instead
Till night declares the final meal
And servant seeks her bed.

VETERAN

I struggled with temptation,
Denial was the cost.
Finally I conquered
Though heavy was my loss.

Not a glorious victory,
No sound of rolling drum
Nor young girls tossing flowers
To welcome victor home;

An almost inadvertent triumph
From which the heart recoils,
The limping soldier footsore,
Indifferent to the spoils;

Not hearing the faint music,
Unmindful of the flag,
Not one shout raised to cheer him,
No eye to brighten, glad;

Nor trophy to proclaim him
The hero who had won —
All his wounds invisible,
All his courage gone.

Across his soul's scarred battlefield
Where all his pride was slain
The legions of his enemy
Prepare to strike again.

THANKSGIVING

1851

We are thinking most of Thanksgiving than anything else just now—how full will be the circle, less than by none—how the things will smoke—how the board will groan with the thousand savory viands . . . Thanksgiving indeed to a family united once more together before they go away . . .

Emily Dickinson

Dear Austin,

Without you we are lacking jokes —
Sobriety's our way!
I'd gorge on laughter for a week
If you'd come home to stay.

We now put poetry aside
With laudable intention;
Father says life's very *real* and
Asks our strict attention.

Father's *real* and mine collide
(Unharm'd, we've both escaped!)
But brushing his world in the dark
I feel my elbow's scraped.

At my request he buys me books
But begs me not to read them;
He fears they *joggle* the staid mind —
My heart persuades I need them.

Mother's health is better now
And sister Vinnie's fine;
Both join in my prayer that you'll
Not miss Thanksgiving time.

The apples are alerted, dear,
The grapes were spoken to
And all await royal visit of
Good son and brother—you!

Emily

SAWDUST

Dear Austin . . . If I hadn't been afraid that you'd "poke fun" at my feelings, I had written a sincere letter, but since "the world is hollow, and dollie's stuffed with sawdust," I really do not think we had better expose our feelings . . .

Emily Dickinson

The next time you decline to write,
Do write and let me know;
The protraction of the insult
Is why I suffer so.

The next time you won't speak to me,
Do stop and tell me why;
The silence that is unexplained
Brings stinging tear to eye.

The next time I'm invisible,
Do try to catch my glance;
I'll don my best identity
And bid you ask me dance.

The next time I am orphaned,
Convey complaint to mother —
And if I've not mislaid my kin,
I'll claim you as my brother.

CONTEMPT

Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry.

Phillip Dormer Stanhope (1694-1773)
Earl of Chesterfield

Dear Austin . . . Father was very severe to me . . . he gave me quite a trimming about "Uncle Tom" and "Charles Dickens" and those "modern literati" who, he says, are nothing, compared to past generations who flourished when he was a boy . . . so I'm in disgrace at present, but I think of that "pinnacle" on which you always mount when anybody insults you, and that's quite a comfort to me . . .

Emily Dickinson

A distance down — uncounted miles —
I hear a muffled sound
Of less concern to summit peaks
Than is a rabbit's bound.

My thoughts are those of eagles,
I know the hawk's sharp cry,
Aloof in pinnacled contempt
I snub the strident fly.

I do not hear the sea complain —
Companion of the cloud,
I seek entry to Olympus
Where gods and silence crowd

In agreeable assembly,
I plead in rapt content —
So voluble my quietude
All give tongue-tied assent.

ABRAHAM AND THE NIGHTINGALE

... how we all loved Jenny Lind ["The Swedish Nightingale"], but no accustomed oft to her manner of singing didn't fancy *that* so well as we did *her*. No doubt it was very fine, but take some notes for her *Echo*, the bird sounds from the *Bird Song*, and some of her curious thrills, and I'd rather have a Yankee. Father sat all evening looking *mad* . . . as if old Abraham had come to see the show, and thought it was all very well, but a little excess of *monke*. She took \$4000 for tickets at Northampton aside from all expenses . . .

Emily Dickinson

Amherst
July 5, 1851

Dear Austin,

I took a carriage through the rain
To hear the songbird tweet;
I'll never do the same again —
A foreign and costly treat.

The acrobatic curlicues!
The vocal hanky-panky!
I'd ask less fanfare and to-do —
I'd rather have a Yankee!

Such goings-on are very well
But life's an earnest bind;
There's Satan, Hell and Judgment Day
To occupy the mind.

A hint of exile in her eyes,
A sadness in the voice,
To contradict the lilting tone
That bade the heart rejoice.

Transporting to another world!
Urging us to follow!
I've no taste for frivolity;
Monkey-shines are hollow.

The way the song enveloped us —
Invisible, its snare!
The challenge of its soft address:
Follow, if you dare!

Who cares a fig for Nightingales,
The cadence palls but soon;
A hooting train, a chickadee —
Now *there's* a Yankee's tune!

Emily

THE TRAVELER

(After a celebration of the opening of a railroad to New London, 1853)

Dear Austin... The New London day passed off grandly, so all the people said. It was pretty hot and dusty, but nobody cared for that. Father was, as usual, chief marshal of the day, and went marching around with New London at his heels like some old Roman general upon a triumph day... I sat in Professor Tyler's woods and saw the train move off, and then came home again for fear somebody would see me, or ask how I did...

Emily Dickinson

A loud *hurrah!* ignites the town,
The strong cheer catches fire,
The hills awaken grumbling
That solitude expires.

Flags adorn the rostrum where
Officials swell with pride;
The village struts excitedly
To see the dream made live.

I-told-you-so! runs through the streets
Electric as a shiver,
The noisy cry of celebrants —
We did it! — rings the river.

A pulsating locomotion
To transport all away;
One — silent in the smoke and din —
Much traveled, who will stay.

The brief jaunt to New London starts,
There boards a jostling throng.
But one seeks New Jerusalem
And knows her journey long.

THREE WORDS

Had I — was there — a summer?
I see the fields have gone,
The vagrant population
All fled or gathered — gone.

As though a floor had emptied —
Dancer, cadence, sped.
I'm left without an emblem
Except three words you said.

Life is short, you told me,
And then I lost your glance.
Such a searing education
An April hour grants!

HOPE

The hangnail of small circumstance
Will cause our hopes to snag —
The letter lost, the tryst not kept,
Then droops the tattered flag.

At littlest sign — a crocus —
Our expectations flow.
Knew we how deep the token lay
We would not let her go.

ONE

One is such a dainty sum —
One bird, one cage, one flight;
One note to sound in unseen wood
Perhaps for God's delight.

A legion would be comfort,
A multitude were bliss;
A frugal hand assigned but *one*
And calls back even this.

LADIES' VERSE

Emily Dickinson seems often to be caught by conventions of prosody or to have relaxed into them, and often she seems merely to echo thoughts that reflect the safe, worn attitudes to Nature, Society or Human Woe that were the nineteenth century's particular poetic counters. Even her admirers must admit that much of her work is almost indistinguishable from the "ladies' verse" that cluttered the journals of her time. Perhaps no other major poet in America or elsewhere has written so many reams of maudlin bad verse.

John Malcolm Brinnin

Only those who are capable of writing well can write really badly.

David Wright

I

Who will mind the fitting
Who knows she'll have a gown?
The patience and the pinning
Improve the frock she'll own.

Who will mind the heavy cross
Who knows she'll have a crown?
The bearing and the struggling
Reward with richer one.

Who will mind the dying
Who knows she'll have a life?
Life is death we're lengthy at —
The dying gives relief.

II

Much bouquet on the window pane,
A trace of moss and fern
Painted by ethereal hand
Whose art no pupils learn.

A nosegay for an angel,
Gathered, etched by night,
To ease rainbow-besotted eye —
Its only palette white.

III

... the least memorable of the several Emily Dickinsons ... is the coy Emily who ... flirts with all the creatures of the earth and air as if she were the inhabitant of a nineteenth-century Disneyland.

John Malcolm Brinnin

I have befriended little things
And shared their guileless pleasure,
Have interviewed unguardedly
Small colonies at leisure.

I've chatted with the Cockney bees,
With orioles and jays;
Melodic frogs have sung to me,
I know the cricket's ways.

The universe so overwhelms
With brash giants overgrown,
The small consort with small to shrink
A world too vast to own.

THE SERMON

When she was twenty-four, [Emily Dickinson] refused to become a member of the church, though she still attended services sporadically. It was a major decision for her, and an expression of her integrity and strong will. She distrusted the lasting value of emotional conversion. Freedom of spirit was of paramount importance to her.

Peter Jones

The chief tension in her work comes from... her inability to accept the orthodox religious faith of her day and her longing for the spiritual comfort of it...

The New Columbia Encyclopedia

The minister today... preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly — and somehow the sermon scared me... He preached such an awful sermon... that I didn't think I should ever see you again until Judgment Day, and then you wouldn't speak to me, according to his story. The subject of perdition seemed to please him, somehow. It seems very solemn to me...

Emily Dickinson

I beg you, learned sir, to tell
Who here is saint, who infidel?
Though I would seek infinity
I bow to your authority
And know your eye is trained to see
Such sins as are concealed in me
Admiring your cheerful tone
When driving the grim message home.
Where is gained the erudition
To speak, at first hand, of perdition?
A gloomy subject I had thought —
My childish whimsy like as not!
Though I might beg before I go
To know why you revere it so?

Most impressive was your relish
When depicting matters hellish —
Do, pray, forgive that naughty word,
I'm just a woman, thus absurd.
Perchance you saw the bonnets shake
Throughout the church for virtue's sake
And our dainty consternation
At your brimstone titillation.
No doubt in scripture you're well versed
But have you hell and heaven reversed?
I seek the way to heaven's gate
Which you obstruct, so I shan't wait;
I'll smile in hollow courtesy
And seek, alone, divinity.

BEYOND THE FOLD

Religion may be defined as what the individual does with his solitariness.

A. N. Whitehead

A citizen among her townsmen yet not subject to the rules by which they lived, she became a sort of hovering presence, the ornamental eccentric of a community independent enough to harbour her with as much pride as embarrassment. . . . Technically her [poetic] range is modest, based on the hymn meters she knew from church and school. . . . Her intelligence was double-edged, too sharp to accept the religion of her generation without making the private rejections orthodoxy would not countenance and altogether too great to be confined within the limits of the fastidious, genteel education to which proper young women of her day were subjected. . . . [One aspect] of Emily Dickinson's character is the saucy little rebel in God's back yard who teases words into the shapes of rococo valentines. . . . who makes God "a noted clergyman" . . .

John Malcolm Brinnin

I heard the bell, saw gathered flock,
I knew the fold was warm,
And saw one creature obdurate
Yet felt but mild alarm.

I knew him fed, I knew him free,
I knew his absence mourned,
But thought that should the wolf affright
His cry the flock had warned.

And should he fall beneath the fang
It gives no cause to weep
That greater pen enfold the lamb
In everlasting keep.

Then ring the bell and call the flock,
Ingather all that stray,
But mark the beast intractable
The fields invite to stay.

EMILY'S SONG

When she writes her address, she puts down Main Street, Amherst, Massachusetts, but she means The Mind of God.

John Malcolm Brinnin

Had hearts the art of porcelain
The mending were small feat
But I have owned one whose repair
Earth's craftsmen can't complete.

Had love asked only giving
The donor were content
But I have known a stealthy hand
Twice prove our loves are lent.

Had death comprised mere dying
The handiwork were sweet
But I mark its keen audition
In every eye I greet.

Had minds a spacious attic
The past were soon antique
But I have one too visited
Where grief renews to speak.

Had heaven held sure solace
To hasten there were wise
But I, grown timid, cautious,
Search for ambush, man's and sky's.

One day I'll meet fate's boldest stare
And ask its harsh command
My apron full of gentian and
Lone daisy in my hand.

Till then, like Jonah in the dark,
I ride the journey out
And count truth's ribs, bemused that faith
So multiplies my doubt.

THE OLD SUITOR

Pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world *insane*, and love me if you will,
for I had rather *be* loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven.

Emily Dickinson

... romantic renunciation humanized the austerity of the record; and a doughty
spirit asserting itself over religion and society alike made her story heroic.

John Malcolm Brinnin

I put my little life away,
Arranged it in a chest;
Brushed carefully and smoothed its folds —
I would not have it crease

Nor fade or stain or be too worn
When taken up again.
"I'll wear it when I'm loved," said I,
But waited long in vain.

I came upon it just today,
The fashion seeming odd,
But slipped it on to pirouette
And please my glass and God.

MOVING HOUSE

I cannot tell you how we moved. I had rather not remember... I took at
the time a memorandum of my several senses, and also of my hat and
coat, and my best shoes—but it was lost in the *mêlée*, and I am out with
lanterns, looking for myself... the pantomime contained in the word
"moved" ... is a kind of *gone-to-Kansas* feeling.

Emily Dickinson

It's a *gone-to-Kansas* feeling,
The moving of one's house.
One's effects packed in a handbox,
One leaves behind the mouse,

The long-endured familiar draughts,
A faithful flowering tree —
At the window, as we pull away,
Distraught, a former me

Signals that I leave behind
Uninventoried days,
But the wagon moves despite my cry,
Its progress none delays.

I cross what seem like deserts,
An aeon on the road;
The pinched face at the window,
The frantic hand that showed

Tell of the irretrievable,
Volubly as tombs —
That creature in the wainscot!
The echoes in the rooms!

FOREVER, NOW

... wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes ... I'm half tempted to take my seat in that Paradise of which the good man writes, and begin forever and ever now, so wondrous does it seem.

Emily Dickinson

All the good by summer given
I take upon my tongue
And break the flesh to drink the juice;
The taste is never done.

All the good the sun has coaxed
I bracket with my eye;
And though the doll close her wax lid
The image does not die.

THE DEMOCRAT

I cannot stay any longer in a world of death. Austin is ill of fever. I buried my garden last week — our man, Dick, lost a little girl through the scarlet fever. ... Ah! democratic Death! Grasping the proudest zinnia from my purple garden, — then deep to his bosom calling the serf's child!

Emily Dickinson

He plucks the proudest zinnia
I'd prized but never held
Then turns his eye upon a child
As casually felled.

Each kingdom that attracts his glance
Seized callously upon —
Insect, robin, pippin —
All realms to him are one.

The tallest towers a city boasts,
Warrior's broad brave breast,
The shrinking girl — he covets all,
Dread, democratic Death,

To crowd his dwelling on cold slopes
Where lovers sleep alone;
Heaven's selective tyranny
Affords a kinder home —

A bosom's feathered comfort —
Death clasps to iced, mean bone;
Heaven pillows with fulfilment,
Death with unyielding stone.

He stalks across my choicest day
To plunder all I see.
I challenge, hand upraised in faith,
His dark democracy.

PROMENADE

... during her seventeenth year, while at Mount Holyoke, the evangelical movement reached the village and seminary. Many of her fellow students committed themselves... Emily held back, even when her family gave way to the fervour of the movement.

Peter Jones

... she did not, and could not, accept the Puritan God at all. She was frankly irreverent, on occasion, a fact which seems to have made her editors a little uneasy... What she was irreverent to, of course, was the Puritan conception of God, the Puritan attitude towards Him, [God being] in her day, a portentous Victorian gentleman.

Conrad Aiken

Matters of Calvinist sermons that her townsmen might mull over on their way home from church... became part of the philosophic reaches of her solitary communion.

John Malcolm Brinnin

Our pastor says we are a "worm." How is that reconciled?... Do you think we shall "see God?" Think of Abraham strolling with Him in genial promenade!

Emily Dickinson

When Abraham strolls out with God
In genial promenade,
The seraphs vie for vantage points
To watch the quaint parade

And glimpse the stalwart patriarch,
Prolific sire "of many,"
A wonder to all angelhood
(It's said they've not sired any.)

His march to Canaan they salute,
His attitude towards Lot,
His willingness to share his son —
(He loves each one begot.)

They cheer him for his Covenant,
Applaud his fertile feat —
But I would beg his "bosom"
And there locate my seat.

A MODEST GLASS

I might tug for a life and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our looking on...

Emily Dickinson

When I turned back and closed my will
I heard a sparrow on the sill
So then took up my modest glass
And looked at him and looked at grass;

Saw tossing maples blithely red,
The dark wood where no word is said,
A girl who swirled in flashing gown
To have the music ease her frown.

I saw the church beside which sleep
Those whose legends headstones keep
And saw a gaunt guest lurk alone
To follow every mourner home.

Then overhead the sun went out.
I saw a man abort his shout.
One cupped his hands and drank his tears;
A third in darkness slew his fears.

Then robust dawn came striding in
As though the night had never been.
The village rose to bake its bread;
Too much was spoken, little said.

A silence seals my bolted will,
The small bird trembles on my sill.
Village, maples, hills will pass.
The sparrow, too. But not the glass.

PROMISSORY NOTE

As a young woman [Emily Dickinson], so Mrs. [Martha Dickinson] Bianchi, a niece, informed us in the preface to *The Single Hound* (1914), had several "love affairs," but there is no evidence that any of them was serious, and we have no right, without other testimony, to assume here any ground for the singular psychological change that came over her... if we seek for the causes of the psychic injury which so sharply turned her in upon herself, we can only speculate. Her letters, in this regard, give little light, only showing us again and again that the injury was deep.

Conrad Aiker

[One persona] of Emily Dickinson is the reclusive bride of silence—the radiant girl in white who tarries in the world like an ethereal visitor...

John Malcolm Brinnir

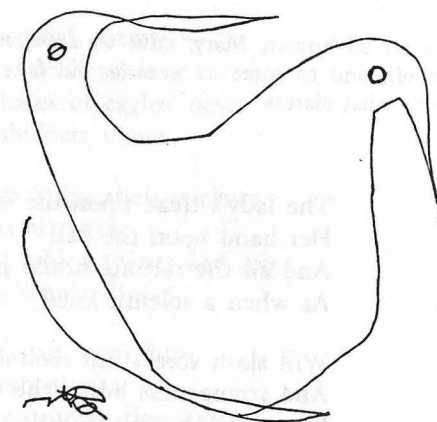
I could not take you to my bed
As lovers have in books I've read
To place your head upon my breast
In soft communion there caressed.
I could not offer you my kiss
Though earth might yield no fruit like this,
Nor give my hand for you to grasp,
Nor could your own my hair unclasp
That it be our sole robe and sheet
In that warm naked place we meet.
My shrine's expectant perfumed air
Heard not your footfall nor your prayer,
Nor was the moment given me
To learn your supple mystery
And in that solitude to raise
A grateful anthem in your praise.
Your laden arms that held all good
I could not reach for, though I would.
Not mine to voice, the circumstance,
That spun me gasping from your glance.
But life I charge to pay its debt
That all I am be made yours yet.
I pledge, should Promissor but smile,
To lay with you an endless while.

*And he took unto him all these,
and divided them in the midst,
and laid each piece one against
another: but the birds divided
he not.*

Genesis 15:10

Life is death we're lengthy at; death the
hinge to life...

Emily Dickinson



PART TWO:

SUMMER SONG 1860-1869

*O Man of Two Visions! Close one eye
and open the other. Close one to the
world and all that is therein, and
open the other to the hallowed
beauty of the beloved.*

Bahá'u'lláh

SUMMER SONG

No pebble mars the brook today,
No film subtracts from noon
And should I faint in daylight
My pillow would be June.

My skin receives the evening,
My eye owns all it scans
And should I faint beneath the moon
She'll reach out long white hands.

THE CALLER

We are all human, Mary, until we are divine, and to some of us, that is far off, and to some as near as the lady ringing at the door; perhaps *that's* what alarms.

Emily Dickinson

The lady's tread upon the step,
Her hand upon the bell,
And all the rattling house grows wise
As when a solemn knell

Will slash across our dailiness
And strangeness burns the throat —
Upon the choking question *Who?*
Our very hand will float

Pathetically, an abstract stalk —
Our ownership a day —
Reminding it is friable.
She does not turn away —

My heart knifed by insistent ring
I steel myself to go
With dread-swamped pulse to swing the door
Upon her fraught *hello*.

THE CRIMINAL

It is a criminal thing to be a boy in a godly village,
but maybe he will be forgiven.

Emily Dickinson

It is criminal to be a boy
(The village won't approve!)
The accomplice of disruptive joy
And unselective love.

Boys leap, or dawdle, dreaming,
A whistle on their lips,
Tell of distant dazzling worlds,
Lost treasure and foreign ships.

Boys rustle so with secrets —
We wince and look askance;
They're intimates of eagles' nests
And may, unbidden, dance.

Small fervours bulge their pockets,
Their grace is all awry,
They blurt of fabled things and sob
Because the phoenix dies.

They are fugitives from duty,
Shun our harsh pieties
Yet without pageantry they serve
No less our deity.

The fox knows their sly longing,
The trees have heard them pray;
I've known one store his lawless hopes
Where nothing may decay.

Bareheaded all the summer long
The boy, pell-mell, will pass,
Till criminal, betrayed like us,
Confess himself to grass.

DEVOTIONS

A mosquito buzzes round my faith
I think to name him doubt.
He's so persistent in his prayer
My own he quite drowns out.

But often, too, an oriole
In close eave-hugging vine
Shares my small mass — his matins
Not so rapt nor loud as mine.

DANCING

You speak of "disillusion." That is one of the few subjects on which
I am an infidel. Life is so strong a vision, not one of it shall fail.

Emily Dickinson

I miss the grasshoppers much, but suppose it is all for the best. I
should become too much attached to a trotting world.

Emily Dickinson

Were only one life given me,
To while its length away
I might dance through the village,
Weary my heels a day.

Benevolence has twinned my birth;
With two to regulate
I closet one and pocket one
And, dancing, feel no weight.

Two were a generosity
Beyond my power to own.
Ample is my cardinal choice
To dance the village down.

COSTUME

...I should love to see you dearly, girls... You seem to take a smiling
view of my finery. If you knew how solemn it was to me, you might be
induced to curtail your jests. My sphere is doubtless calicoes, nevertheless
I thought it meet to sport a little wool. The mirth it has occasioned
will deter me from further exhibitions!

Emily Dickinson

... a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature...

T. W. Higginson

My sphere is doubtless calicoes,
An unpretentious stuff;
On bonnet, cape and parasol
No mitigating ruff

Of lace or ribbon to proclaim
The barn hen aggrandized;
The dun wren won't vex a peacock
Of rainbowed goods comprised.

I twist my hair severe in bun,
Blank ornaments my face;
My costume plain and stiff conceals
Beneath, cascades of lace.

In unredeemed convention,
I stroll and smile, polite;
Ungessed — luxurious tumults
Ravish my glass at night.

Brocades and satins, rarest silks,
A Sultan's jewelled display,
An Orient in my auburn fall
Tomorrow laid away.

An exchequer of unminted gold,
Spiced perfumes beauties spill;
All folded in a laquered box
To lie unspent and still.

COWARD'S CHOICE

Odd, that I, who say "no" so much, cannot bear it from others. Odd
that I, who run from so many, cannot brook that one turn from me.

Emily Dickinson

I would not have you see me weep
If you should go away,
Nor show you yet another tear
If you decide to stay.

I cheat decision by my silence
Which wraps me like a shawl;
Reproach me not for rash consent
Should silence become my all.

No ultimatums pass my lips,
I give demands no voice,
And should you flee or linger here
I take no blame for choice.

To weep's a coward's penalty
Whose choice is not to choose:
For what she'll gain if you depart,
For — staying — what she'll lose.

THE HUNTER

Heaven hunts about for those
Who'd seek its peace below
Then it snatches them away
Occasioning angels, so.

How shall powerless innocence
Repeal predation's law
And the velvet mouse not tremble
To gauge the eagle's claw?

VERDICT REQUESTED

- The First Letter -

... It was in a handwriting so peculiar that it seemed as if the writer might have taken her first lessons by studying the famous fossil bird-tracks in the museum. . . . The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was . . . distinct on my mind . . . and with it came the problem never yet solved, what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism. . . . It is hard to say what answer was made by me . . . to this letter. It is probable that the adviser sought to gain a little time and find out with what strange creature he was dealing. I remember to have ventured on some criticism . . . and on some questions, part of which she evaded . . . with a naive skill such as the most experienced and worldly coquette might envy . . .

T. W. Higginson

Amherst
April 15, 1862

Mr. Higginson,

Are you too deeply occupied
To say if my verse lives?
The mind crowds very near itself
The judgment that it gives

Is clouded by proximity,
And since I've none to ask
You'd earn my quickest gratitude
Did you accept the task.

If no breath propels my lines
And you dared tell me so
I would honour you more deeply,
So beg you let me know.

That you will not betray me, sir,
Is needless to remark,
Since honour is its own best pawn.
Till you judge — Yours, in the dark,

E.D.

EVASION

— The Second Letter —

Of punctuation there was little; she used chiefly dashes [and] followed the Old English and present German method of [capitalizing] every noun substantive... sometimes there would arrive an exquisite little detached strain [but] many of her fragments were less satisfying. She almost always grasped whatever she sought, but with some fracture of grammar and dictionary on the way. Often, too, she was obscure, and sometimes inscrutable...

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

[Higginson's] account of her poetry... indicates how right she was to follow the eccentric bent of her own genius. The alternative was trying to conform to the age's ideas of what a lady poet should be... and present uplifting sentiments in decorous language. [Higginson] primly improved to "weight" [her use of] the muscular colloquialism "heft" [in one of her tropes].

Daniel G. Hoffman

One has a good deal of sympathy for Higginson. He thought that Emily Dickinson's poems were not good enough to be printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*. . . . In putting her question to him [she] wanted to hear the voice of consensus, of "the world of letters." She heard it. And though she continued to correspond with Higginson... though their relationship is pleasant, no greater question hinges on his judgment. [Her] second letter which seems so artlessly confiding, in fact illustrates [her] inviolable privateness.

John Wain

... when [the volumes of her poems and letters edited for Harvard University (1955-58) by Thomas H. Johnson] finally appeared, it became clear that the earlier editors of Emily Dickinson had been widely maligned... as Emily Dickinson wrote them, they would have engaged the interest of the reading public to a far lesser degree than in the form in which they had been earlier presented.

John Malcolm Brinnin

Amherst
April 25, 1862

Dear Sir,

I'm honoured, Mr. Higginson,
To know you scanned my verse,
And found your surgery painless —
I feared it might be worse.

Your editorial fingers,
So delicate and deft,
Have spared the dainty reader
My aberrant use of "heft."

You arbitrate the fashion
Of good literature, I feel,
And safeguard the cloyed palate
Of the proper and genteel.

How admirably you cater to
Propriety and purity;
You mend my fractured grammar
And attend to my obscurity.

The subject, Immortality,
Is one I'm prone to mention;
Delete discreetly rather than
Defy polite convention.

You think my gait spasmodic, sir,
My punctuation quaint;
Your readers must be grateful that
You saved them from my taint.

Correction fosters progress so
How fortunate am I
To have you tabulate my faults —
I'd rather wince than die.

You ask about my sources of
Poetic inspiration;
I wish the answer simply were
Emersonian elation

But a terror came upon me —
I feign that I am brave
And so whistle like the schoolboy
Who'd pass at night a grave.

My parents who are religious
Address in prayer eclipse;
My creed brings me a Presence felt
Whose beauty seals my lips.

My mother does not care for thought,
My father mistrusts books.
Their wicked daughter fondles them
And — dare I say it? — looks.

For poetry I've Mr. Keats
And, too, the lovers, Browning —
I add in haste they're married, sir,
For fear I've set you frowning.

For prose I turn to Ruskin, sir,
And Browne and *Revelations*;
The former quite delight me but
The last-named aids salvation.

My companions, sir, are sundown
And the distant purple hills;
My music, the pond's carols and
Birds' virtuosic trills.

I've not read Mr. Whitman's book —
Disgraceful, I was told —
Would you print, were grammer sound,
A narrative so bold?

You ask me, sir, how old I am;
In truth I made no verse
But one or two till recently —
Is not my answer terse?

How shall I improve my work,
Or is that unconveyed —
Like melody or witchcraft,
By other means conveyed?

I've a brother and a sister
And both are dear to me.
My Carlo sees but does not tell —
Canine civility!

Is this, then, what you'd have me tell?
I'd not fatigue or grieve you;
And winking enigmatic eye,
I smile and wave and leave you.

Emily

SONG OF THE LEAF

My dying tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet . . .
And when, far afterward, a sudden light on orchards, or a new fashion in
the wind troubled my attention, I felt a palsy, here, the verses just relieve.

Emily Dickinson

I seize my courage as a crutch
When fear commands my door,
And hobble to the page for ease
As cowards have before.

A sudden light, an altered wind,
And palsy shakes the leaf.
How slight a palliative, lines,
For ravages of grief.

NORTH

[Emily Dickinson] is the one for whom the unknowable is as present
to her vision as the view from her window.

John Malcolm Brinnin

The sailor cannot see the North
But knows the needle can
And so I launch into the mist
With compass in my hand

And though I find an Orient
My voyage is not blessed
Until I reach more stringent port —
Northbound, my naked breast.

A TOAST

When I was a little girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality; but
venturing too near, himself, he never returned. Soon after my tutor died,
and for several years my lexicon was my only companion. Then I found one
more, but he was not contented I be his scholar, so he left the land.

Emily Dickinson

The friend who ventured too near immortality was a young law student
who worked for a short time in her father's law office, leaving to set up his
own practice and shortly afterwards dying of tuberculosis; Emily Dickinson
had shared books and thoughts with him. The infinitely more important
figure who "... left the land" was evidently the Rev. Charles Wadsworth,
the man to whom she appears to have given her heart and given it once
and for all... no one has found a signed statement that Emily Dickinson
loved Wadsworth. But the evidence can fairly be called conclusive.

John Wain

Could you believe me without? I had no portrait, now, but am small like the
wren; and my hair is bold like the chestnut bur; and my eyes, like the
sherry in the glass, that the guest leaves. Would this do just as well?

Emily Dickinson

My eyes are sherry in the glass
The draining robbed of glow;
The drop rebukes the lonely host
Who let the dear guest go.

Goblet empty as betrayal
Dismays the shivering hand;
My eyes were yours to celebrate
Had you not left the land.

Perhaps you will remember them
As when I was your host;
A kinder gleam illumined then —
Full glass, upraised in toast.

My eyes were yours, my chestnut hair,
All powers I command;
Had you not left the land, my love,
Had you not left the land.

FAME

If [Emily Dickinson] is not the greatest woman poet, it is difficult, beyond the ancient praise that seals Sappho in the classic pantheon, to say who is.

John Malcolm Brinnin

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better.

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson conceded the impossibility of finding readers from the beginning; of the 1750 poems known to have been written by the Amherst recluse, only seven appeared while she was alive, and most of these without her consent and with extreme editorial revision of her text...

Daniel G. Hoffman

I pour my tea in thinnest cup —
Weightless, almost, to lift up;
No pattern mars its purity,
White my cup and pale my tea.

I place my slice upon a plate
Virginal and out of date
And think how small is fare of birds
That yet fly south. But where nest words?

Let mine be that frugal feast
Becoming those who ask the least.
I note in winter, robin gone,
The robust memory keeps his song.

THE TESTED

It is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place, but tests' severe repairs are permitted all.

Emily Dickinson

The orchard much attended,
So mercilessly pruned,
Revives to bear a fuller crop
And so to law attuned

I lift my branch as suppliant,
In confidence that yield
Increases at the gardener's touch
And bounty be revealed.

THE WEATHER IN AMHERST

My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any...

Emily Dickinson

It was love that made my bosom surge,
The same that caused it shrivel,
That swept such arctic through my brain
As sheared it cold and level;

Yet nudged a tropic in my veins,
A sirocco stirred in blood,
Too frail to overthrow the frost
For all the sun's strong good;

And drew me to the homey tomb
Past anguished gales of reason,
To spurn heart's fickle weather
For soul's iron changeless season.

My scant iced signature was silence
Who scarce tugged sleeve of fame.
Do lovers faltering in the snow
Lisp, numb of lip, my name?

THE ONLY GAZE

I fear we shall care very little for the technical resurrection, when to behold the one face that to us comprised it is too much for us, and I dare not think of the voraciousness of that only gaze and its only return.

Emily Dickinson

Not to see what we love is very terrible, and talking doesn't ease it, and nothing does but just itself. The eyes and hair we chose are all there, to us... I often wonder how the love of Christ is done when that below holds so.

Emily Dickinson

I thought, my love, when you were gone
I'd find new loves to look upon
And, desperate, searched a long sore while;
One had your face but not your smile
And one, resemblance of your hand
But not its supple, light command;
Another's voice, facsimile,
But lacked your song's felicity,
One, skill to pantomime your glance
But heard no music, knew no dance.
Still I search and have no rest
Until my eyes your two arrest
And it is given me to stare
Though kingdoms dim and planets wear,
Though heaven pales into a blur,
Its lapse incapable to stir
Till, unrestrained, the famished look
On one whose précis told love's book.

THE HOUSEGUEST

Dear Cousins —

She moves in a smart atmosphere
Her breast armoured in lace;
At her approach the trees stood straight,
The pansies mocked her grace.

The damsel has a dainty air
And wears a narrow boot.
Her glance starched the geraniums
And turned to glass the fruit.

And should she think to leave next week —
(Before she combs the lawn!) —
No less than "*Bon voyage!*" I'd wish —
(Forgive me!) — wish her gone.

Emily

THE COVENANT

Every day life feels mightier, and what we have the power to be,
more stupendous.

Emily Dickinson

Life gives so strong a covenant
Who shall not sign in trust?
Its smallest clause empowered to
Bind atom — sun, or dust.

To all-compelling contract,
Though codicil be pain,
Adheres the constant signatory
Till only God remains.

All that fidelity attracts
A lenient bench reviews;
Sealed by the very hand of God
Exquisite bond renews.

TO TARGET DRAWN

Life is so fast it runs away
Despite our sweetest *whoa!*
The breathless rider's carried
Where the steed would have him go.

Death plods as if reluctantly
Nor bribery spurs his feet
But, unerring, tracks the narrow breast
Where he and other meet.

THE UNINVITED

To everything but anguish
The mind will soon adjust;
Uninvited, that marauder,
Invading, trails his dust

About the scrupulous household
The tidy mind maintains,
Sets soiling boots on ottoman,
Remotest chamber gains —

Wrenches down the damask curtains,
Breaks housewife's favourite bowl
And storms up faith's chaste stairway
To bed the balking soul.

THE SHIPWRECK

It is November. The noons are more laconic now...

Emily Dickinson

Religious themes constantly preoccupy her. "You mention Immortality!" she said in a letter. "That is the Flood subject!"

Peter Jones

The noons are more laconic now
And nights are swiftly born;
Unrecognized Gibraltar lights
Recast the village, foreign —

Till it recedes and strands me here
As shipwreck whose pale shout
Fog-deafened vessel could not catch
So moved from sight. Without,

A lonely, cold infinity,
Within, my small desk, bare —
And had I voice I yet would call
The ship that vanished — where?

Beyond my candle darkness churns
And taunts the lost one — then
Invading blackly snuffs my light
And inundates my pen.

THE WOLF

You mentioned spring's delaying — I blamed her for the opposite. I would eat evanescence slowly.

Emily Dickinson

The ravenousness of fondness is best disclosed by children... Is there not a sweet wolf in us that demands its food?

Emily Dickinson

John Cody sees in Dickinson the characteristics of the emotionally starved child, and has found her oral imagery especially compelling...

Vivian R. Pollak

I

The furred thing rises from its lair
To stalk the transient and fair,
If captured in a springing pounce
The snack's devoured inch by ounce.
Beast sated then will stretch and sleep
Repast forgotten. I would keep
A subtler spoon within my grasp
And charm the dainty to my clasp —
My appetite to place in mind
The cherished tidbit, thus to find
It served on delft of memory
Long gazed upon adoringly.
Unnibbled, it will never fade
Nor will my slavering palate jade
Until a distant feast reveal
The morsel's my eternal meal.

II

If evanescence were the fare
How slowly I would dine,
And bibbed would circle round the board
To have it last a time.

Were immortality the dish
I'd leap across the floor
And seize it whole in both my hands
And beg the host for more.

DISCLOSURE

... I was thinking today, as I noticed, that the "Supernatural" was only the Natural disclosed.

Not "Revelation" 'tis that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes.

Emily Dickinson

The hieroglyphics gouged in air
By an impatient fire-gloved hand
Are given as our library —
We, star-affrighted, gaze to land

Where furnished in an atom's tome
Is erudition of the sky —
The dust-affronted student lifts
A blank uncomprehending eye

And swivelling will not read the book
From which his glance will dart again,
Though it's indexed in his jugular
Where love announces its name;

Will not admit magnificence
Which looms a startled blink away
To bleach with gold the retina
Resigned in arrogance to grey.

A GLEE AMONG THE GARRETS

[Emily Dickinson] mischievously said (of the *Springfield Republican*, edited by her friend, Samuel Bowles) "One of such papers as have nothing carnal in them."

Conrad Aiken

The poet is a menace to conformity...

Rollo May

Today the garrets are astir,
The scandal's quickly spread
By virtue overlaid with glee
While taking tea and bread.

Each lace jabot now wildly heaves,
Their cameos outraged —
To have that vile remark appear
Upon the printed page.

Purity is mortified,
Such wickedness long rankles;
The newspaper has dared imply
That women might have *ankles!*

The word like spice upon the lips —
Oh, dare we think it true?
What would become of womanhood
If everybody knew?

Calvin thundering in his grave!
Victoria in a pout!
And not a corset but is laced
To keep such rumours out;

Nor yet a whalebone stay but knows
Its dark atrocities:
The cost to what it guards is pain
And crimped velocities.

But soon the speculation's lynched
And buried out of town,
To rise some smiling Easter morn
And ring the era down.

A FEAST OF ABSENCE

When you had gone the love came in
As I supposed it would.
Only when the guest has gone
May host partake of food;

Before, is awed by nutriment
So lavishly arrayed —
Guest's absence a starvation
Were lone supping not delayed.

A feast of absence was my life,
"Farewells" the garnish given;
So feted, shall the epicure
Yet beg viands of heaven?

THE NILE

A woman died last week, young and in hope but a little while —
at the end of our garden. I thought since of the power of Death,
not upon affection, but its mortal signal. It is to us the Nile.

Emily Dickinson

Death is the silent, ruthless Nile —
The scaled beast it gives keep
Will, careless, swim its dark coil's length
Till sucked into its deep.

Who'd tell its gulping treachery,
Irrevocably gone —
While down indifferent centuries
The blanching Sphinx looks on

And none may pry her secrets —
Her reason overthrown —
The horror fixed her mindless stare
And sealed her lips with stone.

THE INFATUATION OF SAMENESS

I tell you what I see — the landscape of the spirit requires a lung,
but no tongue.

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson I did like very much and do still, but she is rather
morbid and unnatural.

Joseph Lyman, 1858

[The legend of Emily Dickinson] takes its character mainly from the
romantic sorrows of a vivacious, witty young woman of distinguished family
who fell in love, suffered rejection, and spent the remainder of her life in
a white solitude that was, in the words of her finest biographer, George
Frisbie Whicher, "a long interval of sameness so absolute that the arrival
of a new month was like a guest's coming and the closed vans of a circus
passing her window at night seemed to her an Arabian experience."

John Malcolm Brinnin

It has been conjectured that after a conventional girlhood and a year
at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary she withdrew from the world into the
house of her austere father because of a blighted love affair. Whether or not
this is true hardly matters. The important fact is her choosing to live a life
that accords with Thoreau's advice to "Simplify, simplify, simplify," to
reach down to touch the bedrock of reality on which we stand.

Daniel G. Hoffman

A calendar of astonishment
Delineates my days
Which stretch before like untracked snow
No April could amaze

Nor June provoke to wonderment
Despite its humming green
Against a glacial consciousness
Where noiseless white is seen.

A voice might raise an iceberg
Whose bulk I scarce detect
To eliminate the echo,
As newer snow, defect;

Or whisper loose an avalanche
To blot the boisterous fool
Who'd mar the alpine altitude
Where ice and quiet rule.

And were there heard Arabia,
Malodorous and loud,
A scentless sleet would fast erase
Its clamour, as a shroud

Obliterates that human thing
Which squirmed in love or violence,
Commends it unidentified,
Unvoiced, to clay's blank silence.

An unmarked waste, horizonless,
Lies endless to my sight
And never vulgar sun offends
Its cool and chastening light

That infatuates with sameness
Till voiceless awe arises
And man nor beast nor living thing
But only white surprises;

And silence grows so absolute,
Untongued, the traveler pleads
To sight on steppe one perfect print
And stumble where it leads,

Spurred on by raucous ecstasy —
The only shout internal —
To sink into a waiting clasp,
Welcoming! Eternal!

NOTES FROM A YANKEE KITCHEN

In [Emily Dickinson's] best poems there is a mingling of the high diction of theology with the low diction of the kitchen commonplace.

Daniel G. Hoffman

When I returned from where I'd been
I had outworn my life
So put it pensively aside
As cook the blunted knife.

I did not mourn the loss of it,
Another blade was given,
So bountifully does nature spend —
Or was the donor heaven?

Five empires withal expired
Then in a hard-reached drawer
I came upon the implement
Its use forgot, and power.

Neglect precipitates its rust,
I weigh its worth, a stranger,
Long puzzling why I hoard such tool —
The cutting edge! The danger!

NOT LEAST OF THREE

The mandible of life is Truth
And in this razored jaw
Truth's helpless worshippers succumb
Before they're eaten raw.

Beauty sets a kinder snare
Its martyrs will confess
Though incision by these talons
Proves lethal nonetheless.

I failed in Love's far subtler trap
My final hour was grim —
A trampling by roses,
A rending limb by limb.

A CAPABLE WOMAN

Wanted
To hire a girl or woman who is capable of doing the
entire work of a small family.

Newspaper advertisement placed by
Emily Dickinson's father

A warmhearted sturdy young immigrant, one of the "despised" Irish who were then settling in America in large numbers, filled the position in March 1869. Margaret Maher, just past twenty, became the mainstay of the family and remained till after Emily's death. Mr. Jay Leyda comments: "How often Emily must have looked at Maggie as a fellow exile, for community snobbery was directed as much against the 'lower class' Irish as against the 'upper class' Dickinsons, especially that queer writing woman! . . . they were willing to believe any gossip or 'revelations' about the Dickinson sisters: madness was one of the gentler accusations."

Maggie's letters written in phonetic spelling in a rustic hand have miraculously survived and tell much about her character: "I dont want to disapoint any person or Brake my word if i be Poor and working for my living I will alway try to do rite. . ." (March 2, 1869). Her letters were often signed "Miss Emily's and Vinnia's Maggie." "Emily Dickinson seemed never to tire of defining Maggie's virtues and qualities for herself as well as for her friends," Mr. Leyda observes. "To Mrs. Holland she wrote, 'Maggie, good and noisy, the North Wind of the family, but sweets without a salt would at last cloy. . .' and 'Maggie is with us still, warm and wild and mighty.'"

All Ireland's weather in her face,
Its courage in her chin,
And all its music in her throat,
She calmly looks at him

With such an ancient dignity
As only suffering breeds,
Politely tells her history,
Describes her simple needs

And such vitality exudes
As stirs the very walls,
A strength the storms of Ireland forged
With drenching, stinging squalls.

And now the house reshapes itself
To meet this vibrant force;
*I'll cook and moind me manners, sir,
And tend the girls, of course.*

A northern season comes to stay!
A tempest domiciled!
But well I mark her quick-changed wind,
Salubrious and mild.

Unconcealed her hemispheres,
Her temperate warming streams,
All foretold in earnest face,
Its balance and extremes.

Stout faithfulness had rarely worn
A more endearing frame
Nor had love more rustic residence —
Nor exile less acclaim.

A kindred stuff makes up this soul;
I recognize my twin —
New England's weather in my face,
Its courage in my chin.

... The kingdom of heaven is
like to a grain of mustard seed,
which a man took, and sowed in
his field: Which indeed is the
least of all seeds: but when it
is grown, it is the greatest
among herbs, and becometh a tree,
so that the birds of the air come
and lodge in the branches thereof.

Matthew 13:31, 32

Heaven is large, is it not? Life is short too,
isn't it? Then when one is done, is there not
another, and — and — then if God is willing, we
are neighbours then.

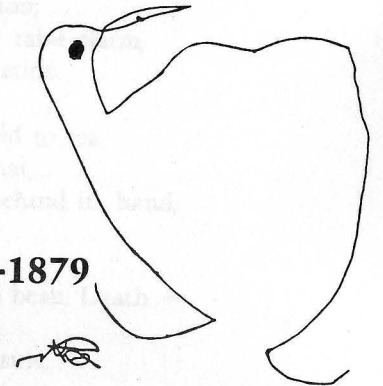
Emily Dickinson

PART THREE:

AUTUMN SONG 1870-1879

O Offspring of Dust! Be not content
with the ease of a passing day, and
deprive not thyself of everlasting rest.
Barter not the garden of eternal
delight for the dust-heap of a mortal
world. Up from thy prison ascend unto
the glorious meads above, and from thy
mortal cage wing thy flight unto the
paradise of the Placeless.

Bahá'u'lláh



AUTUMN SONG

Odours tangled in the trees,
The sky was full of south,
Leaves raced headlong on the lawn,
One rose to kiss my mouth.

Its taste was tart as memory,
Its aroma was goodbye,
I felt a soft astonishment
It should so gladly die.

Immortality was hinted
In its flutter at my lip
Not one shrewd foot in sure pursuit
But cautious lest it slip.

THE KEY OF THE KINGDOM

Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing
at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love...

...I feel as the band does before it makes its first shout... Blessed
are they that play, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Emily Dickinson

Today I want to dance and sing
And shed both shoe and hat;
Though papa flush and mamma blush,
I cannot stop for that.

Today I want to shout my joy —
The only listeners, trees;
And should the steeple look askance,
I'd seize it for trapeze.

Today I want to prink the town
And deck it with elation;
Though all the village raise alarm,
I'd garland next the nation.

Today I'd ask the world to tea
And have it stay to chat;
And should it laugh behind its hand,
I cannot stop for that.

Today I'd toast my old beau, Death —
Concealing my disdain.
Were Immortality his suit,
I'd bid the rogue remain.

THE FIGURE IN WHITE

For the last fifteen years of her life [from 1871 till her death in 1886] the village knew Emily Dickinson only as a white figure flitting about the garden in the summer dusk, as a voice from the dimness of the hall startling visitors in the Dickinson parlor by spectral interjections, or as a presence responding to occasion for congratulation or condolence by neighbourly gifts of flowers and dainties accompanied by little notes pencilled in an odd hand and phrased in orphic idiom.

George Frisbie Whicher

We are told that once a year she met the local world at a reception in her father's house, but sometimes sat with her face averted from the company in another room.

William Dean Howells

Year by year the area of her interest narrowed; year by year her indifference to the outer world grew more arctic. Now she dressed only in white, ventured less and less, and finally not at all, from her home; saw fewer friends, and, at last, none. . . . Long before her death she had become an Amherst legend; the woman in white; the eccentric recluse; the half-cracked daughter of Squire Dickinson.

Robert N. Linscott

If heaven were a league away
I would retire there
And beg a modest lodging,
Pull close to hearth my chair;

But found nearby a hidden lodge
Where I may bide in peace —
Though, curious, some try the door
The latch will not release.

The address none may know or guess,
And none obtain the key;
Each village keeps a benign witch,
Each house a mystery.

So, spectral in the hallway's gloom
I might call out to guest
As though a tentacle had stretched
To fathom foreign depth.

Or in the garden, dim as moth,
May flutter past rude gaze;
A gossip's sentence snaps in half,
Quick-mending to amaze.

But swiftly to my room repair
In space where none may see,
Draw my chair beside the fire and
Gather silence to me.

I wind my thoughts in knotless skein,
Unspoken, mile by mile, —
A league from immortality
Lay down my wool and smile.

RECIPE

I saw your Mrs. H._____. She looks a little tart, but Vinnie says makes excellent pies after one gets acquainted.

Emily Dickinson

Dear Children,

A firmness in the set of jaw,
A flintiness of eye,
Suggest the apple's more to taste
If baked into a pie.

A militancy of bearing,
A piquancy of stride,
Might slowly-stewed acquaintanceship
Reveal sweet pulp inside?

A tart and stinging way of speech,
A manner overbright —
If one likes apples well enough
Long cooking rewards bite!

Emily

THE VICIOUS VISITOR

The will is always near, dear, though the feet vary. The terror of the winter has made a little creature of me, who thought myself so bold. Father was very sick. I presumed he would die, and the sight of his lonesome face all day was harder than personal trouble.

Emily Dickinson

I've had a curious winter, very swift, sometimes sober, for I haven't felt well, much, and March amazes me! I didn't think of it much, that's all! . . . It is easier to look behind at a pain, than to see it coming.

Emily Dickinson

If that grey hulk were merely Death,
I'd square with desolation —
His talent only that to free
His prey from isolation.

I've studied this oaf's vaunted skill
And marked a kindness there;
His lenient blow but sunders cage
That bird may take to air.

A greater menace lumbers now
With sinister design,
More fearsome for its formlessness
Which wraps the prey to dine

Stickily — to pulp the bones
And leave the very soul
Limp and mucilaginous;
And yet the victim, whole,

Endures to see the belching mass
Reluctantly depart
Without remorse that in its maw
It bears the viscid heart.

Then courageless, enfeebled,
The stunned thing in the cage
Turns lifelessly to life again
As one away an age,

Estranged from life's compelling thrust,
Its rude velocity,
And cautious sings, but ever fears
That grey ferocity

Which tore the pinion of its hope
And sucked the pap of will —
Its heinousness to ground the game
It won't in mercy kill.

FATHER

Father does not live with us now—he lives in a new house.
Though it was built in an hour, it is better than this . . .

Emily Dickinson

In April last, while father lived,
He crept out in the cold
And fed with grain the famished birds —
I'd not the heart to scold.

His slipper-shod shy charity,
A balm for me and birds;
I knew his pure and terrible heart
Spoke more in deeds than words.

A sorrow most resembles love,
It leaves the heart inflamed;
Ours eased because he fled our grasp
Accepted and unblamed.

Your letter brought his April back;
I sigh to see it pass
And mourn the unexpressed we lose
Each time we part the grass.

Emily

PROTECTION

[My father's] heart was pure and terrible, and I think no other like it exists.

Emily Dickinson

No cold intention I gave birth
Deprived the bird of breath;
Though I enticed it to my hand
I did not plot its death.

It throbbed ungoverned in my grasp —
The jailers feel it still;
Marked I how soft the small machine
That houses steely will.

Dread unmalleability —
Unfathomably strong —
To veer it recklessly toward life
Where lurk alarm and wrong.

The perilous, stubborn choice it makes
It could not understand.
In fear I clenched my trenchant fist
Who died within your hand.

THE WORD

We must be careful what we say. No bird resumes its egg.

Emily Dickinson

We must be careful what we say!
No word can be recalled
And once expressed reverberates
And we may stand appalled

And wish it back or wish it dead
Or gaze alarmed that we,
In domestic inattention,
Invoked a mystery

Which so reverses all we know
And all that is or seems,
We view our life across a chasm,
Inscrutable as dreams

That trail us with faint messages
Of haunting imprecision.
I once said *love* — my tongue turned stone;
I cannot ask revision.

RETURN OF THE DOVE

Mother went rambling, and came in with a burdock on her shawl, so we know that the snow has perished from the earth. Noah would have liked mother.

Emily Dickinson

Our gentle mother softly rose
To stroll the shivering fields,
Surveying the relentless strength
The fist of winter wields

And argued in her quiet way
For spring's delayed debut,
The advocate applauded by
Trees eager to renew.

The japonica looked hopefully on,
The cold hills stamped their feet;
The birds ignored the crust to hear
Would whiteness now retreat.

The crocus stretched, suppressed a yawn —
Chilled silence was retort;
But mother's shawl cheered all the ark
With burdock's terse report.

CRADLE SONG

Little Irish Maggie [Magaret Kelley] went to sleep at six o'clock, just the time Grandpa rises, and will rest in the grass at Northampton tomorrow. She has had a hard sickness, but her awkward little life is saved and gallant now. Our Maggie [Margaret Maher] is helping her mother put her in the cradle.

Emily Dickinson

A little child is laid to rest,
Heaven sent, heaven blest,
Pillowed gently, not to waken,
Heaven lent, heaven taken.

How green the coverlet of grass
Which none disturbs though centuries pass.
Note how still the cradle lies,
How small a space it occupies.

Whisper softly as you cross
Where her marker gathers moss.
Observe her interrupted dates!
Reflect that death abbreviates!

How young the babe, how long her sleep!
Heaven sent, heaven keep.
Warmly snuggled in the ground,
Heaven lent, heaven bound.

NEAR AND FAR

Remoteness finds a poignancy
Whose message is unclear,
Low-whispered, garbled, urgent, floats
Dim meaning to our ear.

But nearness has the fearsome skill
To speak in lucid tone
And cleave the soul and deafen ear
And turn the limbs to stone.

FRIENDSHIP

To multiply the harbours
Does not reduce the sea;
My little ship love-laden goes —
Returns an argosy.

And though it finds in every port
Both refuge and fair trade
I'd wish the ocean narrower
And ships less frailly made.

CAROL

Exultant shepherds bear the news
That laid in straw was found
A Gift that would renew the earth
Should gratitude abound.

Pass the Gift from hand to hand,
Deplore its rustic beauty;
In mockery fix it to a tree,
Revile it as a duty.

Reject the workmanship as flawed,
Despise its frugal cost
Unworthy of our jaded taste,
Regard it soon as lost.

On unmarked spot near Calvary
Indifference lays a stone,
Reciprocating Gift of gifts —
The worth to Giver known.

Unostentatious is the rock
Whose rude weight naught will lift.
Smile down on our economy —
Sweet Child, accept our gift.

THE SUMMIT

I hope that you are well, and nothing mars your peace but its divinity—
for ecstasy is peril.

Emily Dickinson

Experiment gives stimulus —
Enough to wither fear;
The usual fosters caution
Which guides the foot to veer.

Teased by sharp curiosity
I clambered to the ledge;
Closed to me was safe return,
The height dulled bravery's edge.

The hawk's dark wings here brush my cheek,
Strange winds pull at my hair;
Whose voice dissolved the path I took
And bids me step on air?

SIGHT

The unknown is the largest need of the intellect,
though for it no one thinks to thank God...

Emily Dickinson

The finite we can scrutinize,
The infinite suspect;
And though its emblems singe my eyes
Its outlines I detect.

Should staring cost my shabby sight
And ruin my seldom one
I'll seek its contours with delight,
My hands outstretched in sun.

My pantry eyes thus burned away
And those more rarely used
I'll stroke infinity one day
Acceptably excused.

STRAWBERRIES

Dr. Stearns died homelike...

Emily Dickinson

Eliza brings the strawberries —
Fresh, aswim in cream —
The patient's waking whim to flesh
The taste he'd chased in dream.

A homelike tableau! By the bed
The hushed Eliza stands,
Extends the tempting blood-red fruit —
The sleeper has no hands.

The stopped clock still as Judgment Day,
The girl as still as wood,
And in the dead-white crockery bowl,
Athrob with life, the food.

LOVE'S FARE

The martyr may not choose his food
But gourmand won't complain
If cup holds only suffering
And plate be heaped with pain.

The tart fare, tribulation,
His appetite but whets,
Each lavish course a banquet whose
Swift passage he regrets.

Consumed is each least morsel —
Crumb, stem, stone, rind and all,
The victuals of love's festal board
Were ever sugared gall.

Were final wine a scarlet brew
He'll drain the keg, if able,
And rising long embrace sweet Host
Who sets so rich a table.

THE SPELL

Life holds us in exquisite spell —
The spider's shoe might shake it;
But seething dark conspiracies
Swarm unseen to break it —

A dingy knowing violates
Our sun, our peach, our day,
And though we clasp a friend's warm hand
Its comfort's that of clay.

THE FEW

When I lost the use of my eyes, it was a comfort to think that there were
so few real books that I could easily find one to read me all of them.

Emily Dickinson

In silence I select the books
And come to understand
The ones I'd choose to shelve my mind
Are counted on one hand —

Their speaking power so intense
The reader, eye or ear,
Receives, unmasked, communicant
And neither is in fear

That all should be revealed this way —
A private truth confessed
Which garbed in sombre raiment yet
Will leave both souls undressed —

That mind to mind and soul to soul
Two privacies unravel,
Oblivious to the teeming shelf
Where leathers preen and babble.

THE DWELLING

I do not care for the body, I love the timid soul, the blushing, shrinking soul;
it hides for it is afraid...
Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person, for each of us has the
skill of life.

Emily Dickinson

That sorrow have a place to dwell
And joy a home be given,
God first created fiery hell
And then made placid heaven.

Willing them cohabit in peace
He built a simple frame,
Installed the warring occupants
And gave it flesh as name.

God really does not need such house
Except His powers display,
That under one frail common roof
Two opposing forces stay.

The dwelling is dispensable —
He builds it for a day,
Demolishes at sundown, snatches
Shivering mouse away.

Or possibly He gives the home
That suffering unfold
And, reconciled, the lovers wed
And love's triumph be told.

The Architect designs the house
That peace have roof and eaves.
The passions that have stormed its walls
The mouse observes, but leaves.

THE BELLE

When her hand was attuned to her spirit [Emily Dickinson] worked in the harmony of genius that makes its own world and produces things of absolute individuality. . . . Her kind of domestic mysticism would have gone for little in the world's eyes had she not from her early years shown that she possessed that angelic familiarity with language that defines the poet.

John Malcolm Brinnin

The relentless music's torment
Dooms as it redeems,
Propelling the breathless dancer
Half-swooning toward a dream

That would not have the music cease,
That sweeps away the hall
And leaves the dancer panting,
The sole guest at the ball —

The orchestra dispersed or fled,
Courteous partner gone;
Just the harrying harmony
And at the window dawn.

No pause to ease the ankle,
No fan to cool flushed cheek,
The awesome music swelling
And then a voice: *Child, speak!*

CLOCKS

... [Emily Dickinson] told me much about her early life, in which her father was always the chief figure—evidently a man of the old type... who, as she said, read on Sunday "lonely and rigorous books"; and who had from childhood inspired her with such awe, that she had never learned to tell the time by the clock till she was fifteen, simply because he had tried to explain it to her when she was a little child, and she had been afraid to tell him that she did not understand, and also afraid to ask anyone else lest he should hear of it. Yet she had never heard him speak a harsh word, and it needed only a glance at his photograph to see how truly the Puritan tradition was preserved in him.

T. W. Higginson

The only clock I had was fear
To regulate my hours,
So made a timepiece of my own
From that assigned to flowers.

With all my mornings April
And summer my high noon,
Existence dawdled pleasantly
But expired leaves too soon

Announced a shadowed hour of
Fast-ticking dark despair —
That meridian should falter
And clocks fail all repair.

A kinder dial now governs me
To softly pare my day;
What time? my soul, impatient, asks —
It's ten of life, I say.

THE RUNAWAY

A little boy [Jerry Scannell, age fourteen] ran away from Amherst a few days ago, and when asked where he was going, replied, "Vermont or Asia." Many of us go farther. My pathetic Crusoe—

Emily Dickinson

Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know,
I fear that few are sure.

Emily Dickinson

What distance, sir, to far away?
That's where I plan to run.
I reason there's a sky there, too,
And possibly a sun.

Vermont and Asia sound remote
And dangerous on the tongue,
But I am brave and capable
And strong of limb and lung.

And I shall have adventures there,
See wondrous and strange things.
I'll slay a dragon if I must
And be the guest of kings.

A princess will attract my heart
And by one valiant deed
I shall prove worthy of her love
And on my snow-white steed

We'll ride through cool green forests
To Maine or Zanzibar
And build our Kingdom by the sea.
Tell me, sir, how far?

LAVINIA'S SONG

Vinnie is happy with her duties, her pussies, and her posies, for the little garden within, though tiny, is triumphant...

When the flowers annually died and I was a child, I used to read Dr. Hitchcock's book on the "Flowers of North America." This comforted their absence, assuring me they lived...

Emily Dickinson

The song in summer has a swell
That dulls our darker knowing
When fecundity's green evidence
Riotously showing

And wingéd, buzzing, teeming life
In field, on bough, in stream
Persuade in rapt hyperbole
Abundance were no dream.

Our caution cushioned, we accept
Irrefutable brief
And preen as indestructible —
Then falls the frost-maimed leaf;

And though we coax it tenderly
Or seek art of repair
Its plunge portends — ah, bittersweet! —
A spring renewed elsewhere.

THE TENANT

When her mother was on a visit to Boston, Lavinia Dickinson wrote to her saying, "Pussy is pretty comfortable. Emily entraps a mouse every night."

Some hearts keep kettles on the boil
For any vagrant guest;
Some have doors wide and welcoming,
Inviting: enter! rest!

Ubiquitous, the resident!
Love makes in each his home
And pleads to tenant mine as well
Although its walls are stone

And all within is dank and dark
And none is offered bed.
Insistent Love protests all's well
Where rests his exiled head.

In most unlikely wainscots lives
That miracle, the mouse,
Its scampering the home's sole life.
Come, Love, invade this house

And while stern mind, the landlord, sleeps
And Tabby dozes purring,
Let your ardent, gleeful capers tell:
All's well! Here Love is stirring!

THE INTERVIEW

... on August 16, 1870, I [Higginson] found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent... this interview left our relation very much as it was before;—on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension... [She wore] white piqué with a blue net worsted shawl... She came toward me with two day-lillies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, "These are my introduction"... When I said, at parting, that I would come again some time, she replied, "Say in a long time; that will be nearer. Some time is no time." We met only once again [on December 3, 1873], and I have no express record of that visit.

T. W. Higginson

I crossed the room with flowers
As, curious, he stood;
And knew I need not fear this man
Whose solemn heart was good.

I answered with demureness
The questions that he put
But realization quickly came —
He would not grasp my root

Which plunges in voraciousness
To gather what it earns
Where civility's conventions
The soil not overturns.

The afternoon politely spent,
He bowed and left the room —
As bewildered by the lilies
As by obscurer bloom.

THE FOURTH OF JULY

Did you know there had been a fire here, and that but for a whim of the wind Austin and Vinnie and Emily would have all been homeless? ... I sprang to the window, and each side of the curtain saw that awful sun. The moon was shining high at the time, and the birds singing like trumpets. ... And so much lighter than day was it, that I saw a caterpillar measure a leaf far down in the orchard; and Vinnie kept saying bravely, "It's only the fourth of July."

Emily Dickinson

The mother sleeping guiltlessly,
Hushed daughters creep around
Awed by what their window tells —
Damnation come to town!

Congregationalist horror!
The townfolk rush about
In moist and fervid righteousness
To keep Damnation out.

All their fears are manifest
In hot forked tongues of fire —
Here proof of Satan's subtle scheme,
His ardent, vile desire!

Each barn and horse and house astir!
Each frightened tree stock still!
Damnation dancing everywhere
With diabolic will.

One girl would hold to all she knows,
This hell too close, too real,
Secures our peace against a light
Which starker truth reveals

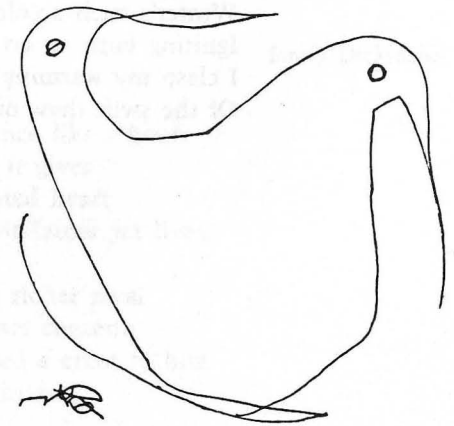
And sweeps red carnage from our mind
That, safe, we take to bed
In gossamer assurance:
Such fireworks! she said.

*Can a bird fall in a snare upon
the earth, where no gin is for him?
Shall one take up a snare from the
earth, and have taken nothing at all?*

Amos 3:5

We dignify our faith when we can cross the
ocean with it, though most prefer ships.

Emily Dickinson



PART FOUR:

WINTER SONG 1880-1886

O Son of Spirit! The bird seeketh its nest; the nightingale the charm of the rose; whilst those birds, the hearts of men, content with transient dust, have strayed far from their eternal nest, and with eyes turned towards the slough of heedlessness are bereft of the glory of the divine presence. Alas! How strange and pitiful; for a mere cupful, they have turned away from the billowing seas of the Most High, and remained far from the most effulgent horizon.

Bahá'u'lláh

WINTER SONG

Peace is such a deep place
And life so small a spoon
Though we dig with fervour
We cannot reach it soon.

Heaven's such a high place
And shank of hope so short
Though we jump forever
'Tis unrewarded sport.

Winter's such a cold place,
Igniting faith an art,
I clasp my warming vision
Of the swift thaw of the heart.

FRAGMENT

... if [Emily Dickinson] writes one poem on a subject, she will probably write several score that come at that same subject in one way and another. Her concern is with ultimates, bedrock realities.

John Wain

... denials and exclusions... shaped her verse no less rigorously than her life.

John Malcolm Brinnin

This is but a fragment, but wholes are not below... the sparrow must not propound his crumb.

Emily Dickinson

I gnaw on absence like a bone;
The nutriment it gives
Suffices desiccated heart
Which though it faints yet lives.

Penury asked a richer meal
But beggar knows content;
If there be tossed a crust to him
He blesses the intent,

Conjectures loaf it's token of —
Stoutened courage bristling,
His want concealed, he owns the street:
Step proud, head high, whistling.

THE GUEST

The stranger, death, is much revered
When he is but a guest.
Inhabiting the mind's spare room
His sacred tenure's blessed.

When he becomes our noisy kin,
Assuming family parlour,
Profane grows the familial tie —
Domestic, our ardour.

Nothing dissolves our noisome bond
Except eternity;
I close the shutters, shun the crowd,
Death too much mob for me.

THE EMPRESS

[Emily Dickinson's] legend does not conveniently accommodate the
outsized "Empress of Calvary"...

John Malcolm Brinnin

Of the thorn, dear, give it to me, for I am strongest. Never carry what
I can carry... What I would I cannot say in so small a place.

Emily Dickinson

Give all your piercing thorns to me,
My sinew grown stronger
By gash, upon a daunting hill,
Where needles wound the longer.

Assign to me what I may hold
For something straightens me;
The weightlessness of innocence
My arms learned from a tree.

TUNE FOR A FIDDLE

We had another fire—it was in Phoenix Row, Monday a week ago,
at two in the night... The brook from Pelham saved the town... The
fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would
wonder which did the most harm...

Emily Dickinson

Stay all the bells lest Thoreau hear
And castigate the Parson,
Or write a windy treatise
On the incidence of arson.

The transcendentalist is soon
Provoked to agitation,
Beware the irked philosopher
Disturbed in meditation.

Desist from clanging! Halt the din!
Forbid your fears to churn.
Join hands with Thoreau, levitate —
And let the village burn.

But should it threaten Phoenix Row,
Preserve the petty cash;
Then play the fiddle, confident
The bird will rise from ash.

STORM

No verse in the Bible has frightened me so much from a child as "from him that hath not, shall be taken even that he hath." Was it because its dark menace deepened our own door?

Emily Dickinson

I shall not venture out today
Unless the skies relent
Their wild and gnashing anguish to
Grant life sun's consent.

There may pass this frantic keening,
Hysteria of rain;
What tyrannical power
Assails ether with pain

As to cancel its avowal,
Withdraw its bridal *yes*?
Inconsolably lamenting,
I'd make a widow's guess.

Such persuasive desolation!
Such conviction in the storm!
How inform the lonely orphan
Redoubtable is dawn?

THANKSGIVING

1882

In spite of her isolation, [Emily Dickinson] was solicitous of village life, held it closely in her attention long after she had ceased to be part of it, and observed it constantly from behind the curtains of her window and the hedges of her garden.

John Malcolm Brinnin

While others go to church, I go to mine. . . . I hope your Thanksgiving was not too lonely, though if it were, affection must not be displeased. Sue sent me a lovely banquet of fruit which I sent to a dying Irish girl in our neighbourhood. That was my Thanksgiving. Those that die are near me because I lose my own—not all my own, thank God. A darling "own" remains, more darling than I name.

Emily Dickinson

Thanksgiving, and the table sighs
Banked high with evidence
That our simple twelvemonth labour
Secures munificence.

The ritual of gratitude
Enacted once again
Confirms that pilgrim voyagers
Sight bounty now, as then.

One drops her work as by impulse
To journey from her breath,
Her *thank-you* unrehearsed, unheard,
Across the chasm, death.

HARVEST

Much comes later, like the peach
Which shuns the tree's debut
And then appears in gratitude
For what a sun can do.

I scrutinize light warily
To see were power able
To fructify the chary soul
To deck a higher table.

STORE

With a to-morrow in its cupboard, who would be "an hungered?"

Emily Dickinson

A Tomorrow in the cupboard,
A shelf stocked with Belief,
Who would be an hungered?
Who, fasting, waste with grief?

An Eternity in mothballs,
A Promise in the drawer,
Who might decline to banquet?
What glutton ask for more?

Triumph sealed in canisters,
Glassed conserves of Delight,
Who would want for laughter
Or fear famine born of blight?

A cellar of Yea Verily
That never vintner sold,
A silo cramfull of Thou Art,
An orchard of Behold.

A Fulfilment in the larder
To batten the most lean,
How perverse the starving
Who will not sup on dream!

A Surely tied in ribbons,
Hope's harvest on the vine,
Well nurtured are the faithful;
How sumptuously they dine!

THE CITIZEN

To venture is to change one's sky;
To love, change hemisphere.
My own is but minutest world,
Its population dear.

And some I love inhabit skies
Where planets churn and toss;
None might have wished to leave me but
There came a plague of loss.

I'm doubly a citizen —
My loves are my estate —
And might I not in either sphere
Find welcome at the gate?

Though each realm yields a universe
But one assures delight;
I stretch my arch but dare not choose —
My poise, retreat or flight?

MOTHER

I hoped to write you before, but mother's dying almost stunned my spirit . . .

Emily Dickinson

Dear Cousins,

To value is a jeopardy,
Naught but the precious harms;
If detachment not be mastered
A loss creates alarms.

Pain's puzzling mission ratified,
Our mother slipped away
To drift into the infinite —
How brief a snowflake's day!

Persistently pain cultivates
A tenderness unknown,
Thus we lost a larger mother
Than any we had owned.

Her retreat achieved in beauty,
That solemn artist, death,
Left her portrait on the pillow —
Detail complete, save breath.

Emily

INTIMATIONS

The past is not a package
The mind can put away
As lover would a letter
To review on loveless day.

The future's not divine report
To scrutinize at leisure
But taps events along the spine,
The swift news doom or pleasure.

Eternity is not a shout
Nor sinister like whisper.
While strolling once through my awed soul
I overheard its vesper.

Heaven's not a smart far place
Small homely things announce it
Joy occupies the environs —
Should pain, shall I renounce it?

WITCHCRAFT

I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it unconveyed,
like melody or witchcraft?
Emily Dickinson

Many of [Emily Dickinson's] finest works have the quality of outrage
packed into formal disposition of words and all but stifled in the process.
She is [sometimes] the demonic artist in fury, wrenching the tight meters
and neat figures of her characteristic language in order to come upon
utterance adequate to her anguish.
John Malcolm Brinnin

... She is the poet of the inscrutable necessity which we endure... there
was no theorist of poetry to prepare the public for Emily Dickinson's
originality; her verse had to win its own readers. It has forced them
to redefine their notions of poetry to include her poems.

Daniel G. Hoffman

... In an earlier time, Dickinson would have been burned as a witch,
for she spoke in tongues and she spoke against authority. She is not
only the poet of consciousness, the register of that mysterious interaction
between the inner self and the world of nature, but the poet who set
herself against religious orthodoxy, the social order, and the poetic
standards of her time.
Louise Bernikow

To offer and withhold the breast
Is woman's only power;
To lay the meal and call the men
Invests her for an hour

With all the kingdom she's allowed,
A brief and sovereign sway;
My breast untapped, no kitchen mine,
Yet I shall find a way.

For other powers roil in me —
Unchecked, would scald with rage;
Aproned in meek gingham poise
I set my pen to page

And not a witch who ever burned
But lends her skill to me.
I tip my furious cauldron
And set their spirits free.

HIGGINSON'S CHOICE

From [Higginson's] choice of her poems one can gauge the preference of the time for narrative moralizing poems on such topics as "Life," "Nature," "Love" and "Death." Under such rubrics, and under poem titles of his own composition, Higginson presents his poetess, only by degrees moving the reader toward the disquieting surprises of a poem like "Safe in their alabaster chambers."

Daniel G. Hoffman

[Emily Dickinson] that prolific writer of notes of condolence...

Northrop Frye

... Love is that one perfect labour naught can supersede. I suppose the pain is still there, for pain that is worthy does not go so soon... Put it out of your hearts, children. Faith is too fair to taint it. Love will not expire. There was never an instant when it was lifeless in the world...

Emily Dickinson

... of all great poets, she is the most lacking in taste; there are innumerable beautiful lines and passages wasted in the desert of her crudities; her defects, more than those of any other great poet that I have read, are constantly at the brink, or pushing beyond the brink, of her best poems.

Yvor Winters

Death cannot plunder half so fast
As fervour can re-earn;
Engaged in love's employment
It magnifies return.

Though stealthy, swift and rude the hand
That rifles all our gains,
Loss compounds abundance,
By mandamus all remains.

Fervour summons lasting wealth
Earth lends but heaven stores —
Death that bank's mere messenger
Who cannot pass its doors.

The daring theft is bungled —
Vigilant faith frustrates;
For love is never destitute
While heaven compensates.

CONVERSATION

The temperature of other minds —
How new and strange an awe!
My own words chill and burn me
Chafing my brain raw.

Moderate words from lips of guests
Alarm — as zephyr blown —
One whom extremes have nourished
But was not quite alone;

One who conversed in accents
Temperate tongues disown —
The delirium of fever,
The chink of frozen bone.

THE LESSON

Anecdotes relating to [Emily Dickinson's] mischievousness, her wit, her waywardness, are not enough. . . . We like to know . . . that even when her solitude was most remote she was in the habit of lowering from her window, by a string, small baskets of fruit or confectionery for children. But there are other things we should like to know much more. There seems now, however, little likelihood of our ever learning anything more . . .

Conrad Aiken

The children's eyes grow round and wise,
Their exclamations ring,
That manna should be basketed
And lowered by a string.

I'd entice their confirmation
That though the source be far,
Incredibly the suppliant's hope
Brings bounty where they are.

I'd have these famished pilgrims learn
What weak thread bears delight —
No heart without its desert,
Its weary Israelite;

How mute prayer will yield oasis
In monotony of drouth
And faith's shy intermittent plea
Place honey in the mouth;

And miracles grow commonplace,
As homely as my twine,
While love waves from a window
As from a place divine.

THE SEAMSTRESS

It is love that threads my needle,
Affection braids the ply,
Faith's thimble nimbly shields from stab —
Thus swift my fingers fly

To stoutly reinforce the seam
Against death's careless rending;
My cunning stitch destructible
But Heaven deft at mending.

THE HEARTH OF HEAVEN

In heaven's frigid corridors
Cold angels dine alone;
God's loneliness congeals desire
And chills aspiring bone.

Draught-swept divine remoteness
Refrigerates our awe
That the timid thermophilic soul
Precipitate heart's thaw

By the fire of its longing
And thus will conflagrate
And warm the lonely feet of God
At reunion's cheering grate

Where angels in their threadbare coats
Extol the willing flame
Which God — His hands outstretched to it —
Gives everlasting name.

REVENGE

... I grew very sick and gave the others much alarm... the doctor calls it "revenge of the nerves"; but who but Death has wronged them?

Emily Dickinson

How great the elasticity
Of chambers of the brain,
Accommodating in small cell
So huge a bulk as pain!

How deft the brain's facility
For storing and retrieving!
How prompt to activate the heart's
Capacity for grieving!

The efficiency is equal
When joy's the subject stowed,
But rattling in its dwarfing cell
Will languish and erode

For busy death will place such call
Upon the bustling brain,
Although review of bliss were asked
The heart will plead in vain.

THE BELOVED

While she wrote love poetry that indicates a strong attachment, it has proved impossible to know the object of it, or even how much of it was fed by her poetic imagination.

The New Columbia Encyclopedia

Certain poems exist which I find impossible to interpret except in terms of human, rather than divine, love. One such poem, written about 1882 ... [is] infinitely touching in what it reveals of the silent suffering of the woman behind the poems.

John Wain

... what is remarkable is that her withdrawal, although it began gradually, eventually became as total as a religious renunciation. And it is not an impossible hypothesis that the Beloved whose departure she mourns may not be a particular man but Christ, the loss of religious certainty, the Soul's lover.

Peter Jones

There is no hint of what turned her life in upon herself, and probably this was its natural evolution, or involution, from tendencies inherent in the New England, or the Puritan spirit... no doubt [poetry] was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life... We have never known the invisible and intangible ties binding all creation in one, so nearly touched as in [her poems].

William Dean Howells

I could not spell your name, my love;
No letters could contain you.
Embarrassed was the pen that tried
To address or to name you.

I could not paint your portrait, dear,
Whose face defied all palettes;
The shrinking brush, despairing hand,
Lacked craft to truly tell it.

I could not match your praise to song —
Unfit my voice and cadence,
Nor music ever was composed
Adequate to radiance.

Death came before I found the means
To spell or paint or sing you.
My silent soul which all inscribed
I hasten now to bring you.

POEM

I fashioned from my pain a poem,
Inscribed it on a page;
I used self-pity as my pen
And dipped the nib in rage.

The letters wept themselves away,
The sheet went blank with shame
And I could not recall the verse
Although my grief remained.

I made from hurt another song
And wrote in in the air;
My pen was formed of fortitude
My brilliant ink was prayer.

The letters set themselves aflame,
The page was upward flown,
By wind or heaven now perused —
To both the author's known.

CALLED

A word is inundation, when it comes from the sea.

Emily Dickinson

The shore is safer than the sea,
It does not seethe nor call
Nor buffet and betray who'd quest
Nor heinously appal.

Astute's the pilgrim on the land
Who never heeds the sea
And resolutely walks away —
It is not so with me.

I gaze upon the bitter wrecks
Mercilessly broken
And gauge my craft and weigh the words
The scheming waves have spoken.

A PAGEANT OF ALLEGIANCES

The instructions left by Emily Dickinson for her funeral sound like the directions for a pageant of allegiances. . . . She asked to be carried by the six Irish men she had known . . . out the back door, around through the garden, through the opened barn from front to back, and then through the grassy fields to the family plot, always in sight of the house.

Jay Leyda

I know the funeral I would choose —
A light solemnity;
Two Dennys, Stephen, Pat and Dan
And Tom to carry me.

Through the back door, slow of gait,
The boys will bear my shell
To traverse again the garden
Which I, when quick, knew well.

Then through the barn's broad wide-flung doors,
For though I then be mute,
The beasts and good scents bidding there
I would again salute.

And crossing front to back the barn
The men will find the fields
I visited (more agilely!)
To learn what Nature yields.

And could they rest a moment there
The pausing were relief
And all the fading things I mourned
Should know my span was brief.

At last the family plot attained,
Strong arms lay me away
That husk begin its final task
And gently wilt to clay.

I know the funeral I would choose
When I forsake my room;
Tom Kelley and his stalwart five
Will guide me to the tomb.

A slow tour of allegiances
Past all I loved and knew,
While I in vast eternity
Smile down on the review.

NOTICE

There's something humble marrow knows
That's shy to meet the mind,
A subcutaneous wisdom
Brain's scalpel cannot find;

And, whispering, lifts the hackles,
Spells eviction to dense bone
To warn the tenant of smug flesh
To seek a fitter home.

LAST WORDS

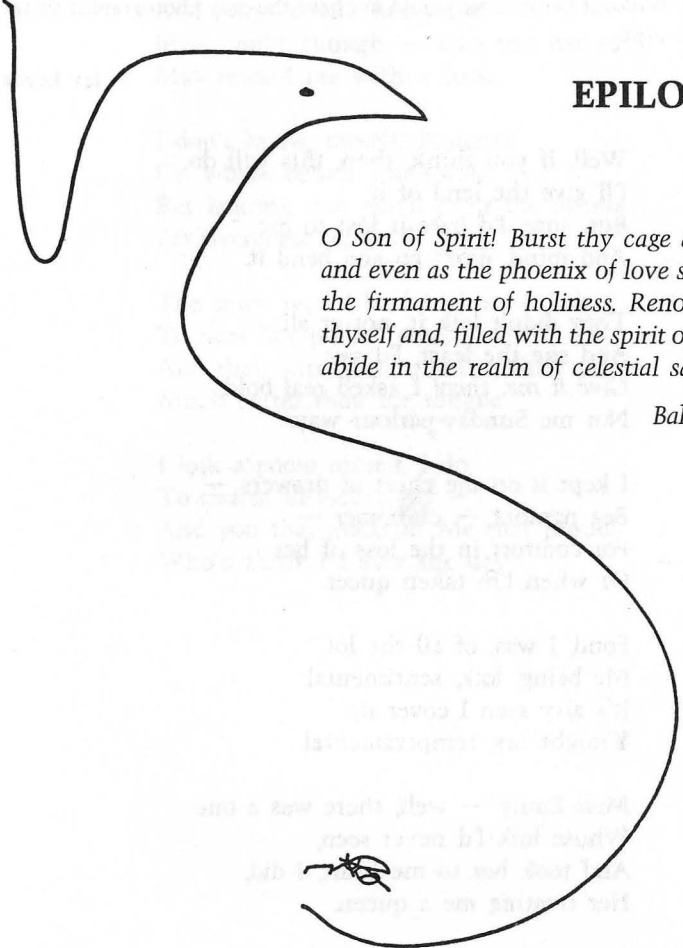
The mist is rising
and I must go in. Called back, little ones.
The air like gingerbeer —
and God all morning
and naught will fail or fear —
the least, the least of sparrows
and there shall be no mourning —
and healed, healed all my sorrows —
and a rank, radiant as light,
a rank of angels —
Oh what a dear confusion!
but a life is such a little thing to lose —
and God's face bright, not angry,
I shall not scuff my toe and say You wronged me,
but joy and bells and ecstasy
and the gleaming City, white and past imagining,
a face at every window — God's Own face!
There was so much to love
even in my little world
and the smell of apples might detain me —
And labour put away, and pain,
an evanescent grace and June forever!
A waving hand — Oh, is it Jesus?
The door where all attain all goodness,
where saints and children gather —
migration is a friendly flight —
but let there be alyssum with the balm
and damson and the wild daisy — even one! —
and love, unending love,
and never parting
and forgiveness like a flood —
and an early peach.
All is astonishment
and those I loved awaiting —
Oh this light unbearable!
It burns, it burns.

And the open door — I reach, I reach —
In the Lord put I my trust: how say ye to my soul,
Flee as a bird to your mountain!
Oh Father, calling, calling — and the light!
The light an immolation! Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes...
Oh this lifting, lifting —
lifting beyond sense,
past doubt and why and how!
Bright Presence, lift me now!

Our soul is escaped as a bird out
of the snare of the fowlers: the
snare is broken, and we are escaped.

Psalms 124:7

EPILOGUE



O Son of Spirit! Burst thy cage asunder,
and even as the phoenix of love soar into
the firmament of holiness. Renounce
thyself and, filled with the spirit of mercy,
abide in the realm of celestial sanctity.

Bahá'u'lláh

I believe that we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker —
that One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still
further to surprise that which He has caused. Beyond that all is
silence...

MAGGIE SAVES THE DAY

When Emily Dickinson's poems found an audience [some time after her death in 1886 of what was diagnosed as Bright's disease] and a photograph of her was needed, Maggie [Margaret Maher, the Irish servant] offered a daguerreotype that the family, including the sitter, had disliked and discarded. Without her love we would not have the only photographic image of a great poet.

Jay Leyda

Well, if you think, then, this will do
I'll give the lend of it;
But, sure, I'd hate it lost to me
And mind, don't go and bend it.

They didn't loik it, not at all,
And she the least, I'd say;
Give it me, then! I asked real bold,
Not me Sunday-parlour way.

I kept it on me chest of drawers —
Beg pardon! — *chiffonier* —
For comfort in the loss of her
Or when I'm taken queer.

Fond, I was, of all the lot,
Me being, loik, sentimental;
It's aisy seen I cover up
Ymight say, temperamental.

Miss Emily — well, there was a one
Whose loik I'd never seen,
And took her to me heart, I did,
Her treating me a queen.

And some in town mistaking her —
They thought her strange because...
Well, never mind — I seen and knew;
Why, half a saint she was.

When I'd not yet confessed me sins
And won a state of grace,
I'd lash the townfold with me tongue
And tell them to their face.

So take it then, the loikness,
And print it with her verse,
Miss Emily, though — God rest her soul,
May reward me with a curse.

I don't know, meself, Posterity
On whose behalf you speak,
But hearing that you'll print the poems
I'm overcome all weak.

The town would be fair dumbstruck
To hear her praises sung
And that, sure, puts them in their place
Much better than me tongue.

I loik a poem meself, I do,
To charm ill-luck away —
And you that grateful! Me that proud!
Who'd think I'd save the day?

WHO?

When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me,
but a supposed person.

Emily Dickinson

It is of course possible to draw inferences about the artist from the work of
art and vice versa, but these inferences are never conclusive.

C. G. Jung
Psychology and Literature (1930)

Her poems tell it all, and what they say should be the final truth.

John Malcolm Brinnin

Not the poet but the poem.

Tagore

I was the girl in crimson silk
You clasped in your embrace,
But when you pressed your lips to hers
She did not have my face.

I was the austere cloistered one
You sighted from your carriage
Who when you called in courteous suit
Revealed another marriage.

I was the frivolous dainty belle
Beneath lace parasol,
But when you called to conquer her
It was not me at all.

I was the flitting, white-gowned girl
Whose garden at twilight
Contained her as a faint dim moth —
My voice belied your sight.

I was the wraith betrothed to Death
You'd rescue back to Life.
The laughing girl you told of this
You would not have for wife.

I was that one who spelled her love
In words that all might see,
But when your hot eye stripped the page
It read: Eternity.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? [Emily Dickinson] looked into
depths we can only just bear to know about, pushed against frontiers we
shrank away from. . . . When we read her poems, we are in the presence
of something as pure and cold as water that comes up from hundreds of
feet deep in the rock.

John Wain

JUDGE TENDERLY

Shall I write
And not of thee through whom my fingers bend
To hold my quill?

George Herbert
1593-1633

My words were medicines to me
Who found no other balm,
For raging fevers clawed at me
And verse restored the calm.

My words were torn up by the roots,
In indignation wrenched
From the dark soil of a heart
That piercing knowledge drenched.

My words were cryptic, crudely formed,
Their drilling pace intense;
Say not I spoke inaudibly
Though firm my jaw was clenched.

My words were bullets aimed in haste,
Their purpose not to slay
But signal that I found retreat
In news a world away;

Were white flags raised on hope's rampart
So Immortality
Send Death to exculpate the crime
And set the exile free.

GENERAL NOTES

Letters of Emily Dickinson

Excerpts on the title and divider pages are from letters to: Holland, Autumn 1859 (title page); Root, May 7, 1850 (Part One); Norcross, May 1863 (Part Two); Holland, 1853 (Part Three); Turner, 1859 (Part Four); Norcross, November 1882 (Epilogue).

In instances where specific letters suggested a poem or were, for mood, consulted, the date and name of the recipient is given in "Notes on the Poems" on pages 136-142, unless identified in the epigraph. Information about the recipients is given under "Correspondents" on page 18.

Quotations from Bahá'u'lláh

The quotations of Bahá'u'lláh used on the title and divider pages are from His mystical composition, *The Hidden Words*, written circa 1858 on the banks of the Tigris in Baghdad, after He had left His native Persia.

Jacket and Divider Page Drawings

Tsepohr ("Bird"), by Yisraela Uzziel, age five, of Haifa, Israel, used by permission of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Uzziel.

NOTES ON THE POEMS

PART ONE: SPRING SONG

- Spring Song*. E.D. to Samuel Bowles, Spring 1862.
May One Waltz! E.D. to Abiah Root, May 7, 1845.
Bread. E.D. to Abiah Root, 1845. Emily Dickinson's bread won a prize of 75¢ in the Annual Cattle Show of 1857 and she served as judge in successive shows, Division of Rye and Indian Bread.
The Prisoner. E.D. to Abiah Root, May 16, 1848; to L. and F. Norcross, 1864.
Home, Sweet Home. E.D. to Abiah Root, January 17, 1848.
Valentine. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, February 1848; to L. and F. Norcross, 1870.
Prayer. E.D. to Abiah Root, May 7, 1850.
Veteran. E.D. to Abiah Root, May 7, 1850.
Thanksgiving: 1851. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, November 17, 1851.
Sawdust. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, July 5, 1851; to Austin Dickinson (undated) 1851.
Contempt. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, April 1853.
Abraham and the Nightingale. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, July 5, 1851. Jenny Lind (born Johanna Maria and latterly known as Madame Jenny Lind-Goldschmidt) was a Swedish soprano, unrivaled master of coloratura; she was known as "the Swedish Nightingale." After retiring from the operatic stage in 1849 she devoted herself to concert singing and oratorio. In 1850-52 she was engaged to sing on tour in America by P. T. Barnum.
The Traveler. E.D. to Austin Dickinson, June 1853.
Three Words. E.D. to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, 1858.
Hope. E.D. to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, Autumn 1859.
One. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, Autumn 1859.
Ladies' Verse. I - E.D. to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, 1853; II - to Mary Bowles, 1859.
The Sermon. E.D. to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, 1854.
Emily's Song. E.D. to Samuel Bowles, 1858: "In such a porcelain life one likes to be sure that all is well lest one stumble upon one's hopes in a pile of broken crockery."
The Old Suitor. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, late Summer 1856.
Moving House. E.D. to Dr. J. G. Holland, 1856.

- Forever Now*. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, Summer 1856.
The Democrat. E.D. to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, 1858.
Promenade. E.D. to Samuel Bowles, 1858. Gen. 17:5: Abraham, "father of many." Abraham's bosom is a synonym for heaven to some Christians and Jews: Luke 16:22-31.
A Modest Glass. E.D. to L. Norcross, 1859.

PART TWO: SUMMER SONG

- Summer Song*. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1861.
The Caller. E.D. to Mary Bowles, 1861.
The Criminal. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1861.
Devotions. E.D. to Mary Bowles, August 1861.
Dancing. E.D. to Maria Whitney, 1883; to L. Norcross, December 1861.
Costume. E.D. to L. Norcross, December 1861, with salutation "Dear Peacock." Higginson's remark is from his account of his first interview with E.D., August 16, 1870.
Coward's Choice. E.D. to L. Norcross, December 29, 1861.
The Hunter. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1861.
Verdict Requested. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, April 15, 1862. Higginson's comments are from his *Atlantic Monthly* article of 1891.
Evasion. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, April 25, 1862. William Dean Howells (1837-1920) in his "Editor's Study" in *Harper's New Monthly* magazine, LXXXII, January 1891, observed that the roughness of the poems is deliberate; "It is the soul of an abrupt, exalted New England woman that speaks in such brokenness." Higginson had written that her poems would seem to some as having been "torn up by the roots." Examining the exchange of correspondence between E.D. and Higginson over the years, Conrad Aiken noted that her letters to Higginson "show the wayward pupil replying with a humility, beautiful and pathetic, but remaining singularly, with unmalleable obstinacy, herself." Her "highly individual gift, and the singular sharp beauty, present everywhere, of her personality" he wrote, "suffice to put her among the finest poets in the language."
Song of the Leaf. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, June 8, 1862.
North. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, June 8, 1862.
A Toast. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, April 25, 1862 and July 1862.
Fame. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, June 8, 1862.
The Tested. E.D. to T. W. Higginson (date uncertain).

The Weather in Amherst. E.D. to T. W. Higginson (date uncertain).
The Only Gaze. E.D. to Maria Whitney, 1884; to Mary Bowles, 1862.
The Houseguest. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, Autumn 1863.
The Covenant. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, Autumn 1864.
To Target Drawn. E.D. to L. Norcross, February 1865.
The Uninvited. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1865.
The Shipwreck. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1865.
The Wolf. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1866; to Maria Whitney, 1883.

John Cody in a psychoanalytic discussion of oral imagery entitled "Great Pain" (Cambridge, Mass., 1971) advances the view that E.D. suffered a total mental collapse just before the onset of her great creative period, 1858-1862, a breakdown which he thinks attributable in large part to the inadequacies of Emily Norcross Dickinson as a mother. Vivian R. Pollak believes, rather, that Emily's gradual withdrawal from the social world was primarily a political response to the extreme sex segregation of mid-century Victorian America, and that "the psychodynamics of the Dickinson household represented cultural, rather than personal disease."

Disclosure. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, 1862-63 (?).
A Glee Among the Garrets. The title is derived from Emily Dickinson's poem which begins "That is solemn we have ended." Rollo May's words are from his *The Courage to Create*.
A Feast of Absence. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1866.
The Nile. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1866. John Wain comments, "She broods on death continually, not out of morbidity but because death is the point at which time-bound human existence abuts on the timeless. . . . Even in a blankly anti-metaphysical view of experience, death has the importance that Miss Emily accords to it, forming as it does the intersection between one dimension and another."
The Infatuation of Sameness. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1866. Joseph Lyman lived with the Dickinson family during the winter of 1846 and formed a close platonic attachment to Emily who appears to have remained his ideal of superior womanhood. The comment cited above the poem is from a letter to Lyman's fiancée written in 1858. In 1862 E.D. wrote to Mabel Loomis Todd, wife of an astronomer at Amherst, and first editor of her poems and letters: "God's unique capacity is too surprising to surprise," and in November 1882, to her Norcross cousins, she

wrote, "I believe the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still further to surprise that which He has caused."
Notes from a Yankee Kitchen. The poem was suggested by Daniel G. Hoffman's comment appearing above it
A Capable Woman. Margaret Maher came from Parish Kilusty in Tipperary. Her letters to a former employer miraculously survived and are preserved in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library; some are owned by Harvard College Library.

PART THREE: AUTUMN SONG

Autumn Song. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1866.
The Key of the Kingdom. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1870 and Spring 1881; also to Holland, 1862.
The Figure in White. As early as 1853, Emily Dickinson had written to a friend, "I do not go from home." She was then 23 years old. By the time she was 30, Conrad Aiken notes, "the habit of sequestration had become distinct." Some commentators feel that it hardened into a mannerism in which she took perverse pleasure. Others see it as a device which freed her to concentrate on her writing.
Recipe. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1870.
The Vicious Visitor. E.D. to L. Norcross, Spring 1871; to L. Norcross, 1860; to Samuel Bowles, 1862.
Father. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1874; to Mary Bowles, January 1878 and April 1880. Edward Norcross died on June 16, 1874, in Boston.
Protection. The incident is fictitious. Conrad Aiken in his introduction to *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1937), without adequately elaborating it, alludes to an incident in Emily's childhood which might be construed as an example of childhood cruelty to animals, which suggested the poem. The statement by Emily Dickinson was reported by T. W. Higginson in his account of their first interview.
The Word. E.D. to L. Norcross, 1872.
Return of the Dove. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, Spring 1870.
Cradle Song. Mr. Jay Leyda, in his study of Emily Dickinson, points out that the immigrant Irish had even fewer freedoms than American women. Their religion, he says, made an excellent

barrier in the tightly-buttoned Congregationalist villages of Western Massachusetts. He reminds us that even an advanced newspaper like the Springfield Daily *Republican* was "jocular about any local Irish tragedy" while the "civilized" magazine, *Scribner's Monthly*, even as late as the 70's, "supported its shabby Irish anecdotes with threatening editorials." The poverty in which the immigrants lived no doubt contributed to their early death.

Mr. Leyda comments that Emily's interest in birth and death may well have originated or been reinforced by her association with settlement families. Richard and Ann Matthews, English immigrants who worked for the Dickinson family on Pleasant Street, are mentioned in her letters. Ann bore 16 children during Emily's lifetime, nine of whom died. "Although a recluse," Mr. Leyda states, "her circle of friends, acquaintances and correspondents was very large and there appears to have been a continuous exchange with other minds and temperaments. Although ingenious enough to reduce the number of outside pressures to suit the work she was determined to do, there was a point beyond which she could not and would not go in her social housecleaning."

- Near and Far*. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1873.
Friendship. E.D. to Perez Cowan, 1873.
The Summit. E.D. To F. Norcross, 1873.
Sight. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1873 and 1876.
Strawberries. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, August 1876.
Love's Fare. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1870.
The Spell. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1873.
The Few. The comment attributed to Emily Dickinson by T. W. Higginson in his account of their first meeting, August 16, 1870.
The Dwelling. E.D. to Abiah Root, January 1851; to L. and F. Norcross, 1873.
The Belle. E.D. to T. W. Higginson, 1879.
Clocks. From Higginson's account of his first meeting with Emily, August 16, 1870.
The Runaway. E.D. to Elizabeth Holland, 1877; to Charles H. Clark, June 16, 1883. The boy's father, Dennis Scannel, worked for the Dickinsons.
Lavinia's Song. E.D. to Maria Whitney, 1884; to T. W. Higginson, 1877.

- The Interview*. From T. W. Higginson's *Atlantic* essay.
The Fourth of July. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, July 1879. Emily makes it clear in the letter that Vinnie was trying to calm her sister's fears, whose effort both amused and touched her.

PART FOUR: WINTER SONG

- Winter Song*. E.D. to L. Norcross, January 1865.
Fragment. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1880; to Mrs. Edward Tuckerman, 1880.
The Guest. E.D. To Mary Bowles, April 1880.
The Empress. E.D. to L. Norcross, Spring 1881.
Tune for a Fiddle. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1881. Henry David Thoreau, 1817-62, was born in Concord, Mass. Conrad Aiken assumes that Emily Dickinson fell prey to the then current Emersonian doctrine of mystical individualism which Henry James noted played almost the part of a social resource in a society lacking entertainment. Aiken also remarks that Emily Dickinson barely mentions in her letters the important literary events which were taking place in her lifetime in America: Emerson lived only 60 miles from her home; Hawthorne was publishing his works during her teens; Poe's works were published in 1850 and Melville brought out *Moby Dick* in 1851; Thoreau's *Walden* appeared when she was 24 and the next year Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Other commentators have remarked that the Civil War did not find its way into her work.
Storm. E.D. to James D. Clark, Autumn 1882.
Thanksgiving: 1882. E.D. to O. P. Lord, December 3, 1882.
Harvest. E.D. to Maria Whitney, 1883.
Store. E.D. to Maria Whitney, Summer 1883. See Qur'an 7:172—the question put to "every human being as he comes into existence" is "Am I not your Lord?" to which reply is made "Yea verily, Thou art!"
The Citizen. E.D. to Maria Whitney, 1883.
Mother. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, November 1882, and to Norcross, 1864. Mrs. Dickinson, who was nursed by Emily during the last 15 years of her life, died in 1882.
Intimations. To Maria Whitney, 1883.
Witchcraft. Louise Bernikow makes the telling point that what is commonly called literary history is actually a record of the

choices made by white educated males (in England and America) and reminds us that Emily Dickinson was born at a time and in a culture in which "ladies" were expected to be "charming, acquiescent and voiceless." Dickinson achieved in her poetry something she could not have done by other means without severely dislocating consequences—she "found a voice both original and strange in which to speak the kind of honesty that exists in no other poet of her time, male or female. That voice is the poems..." Allen Tate has also commented that Cotton Mather would have had Emily Dickinson "burnt for a witch." *Higginson's Choice*. The epigraph is from one of Emily's letters to L. and F. Norcross, 1870.

Conversation. E.D. to Joseph K. Chickering, 1883.

The Seamstress. E.D. to L. Norcross, January 1859—this letter offers evidence that Emily sewed.

The Hearth of Heaven. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, 1861.

Revenge. E.D. to L. and F. Norcross, July 1884.

Called. E.D. to Abiah Root, January 1851; and to unknown recipient, 1885.

A Pageant of Allegiances. The Irish workers who carried her to the grave she still occupies were Thomas Kelley (leader), Dennis Scannell, Stephen Sullivan, Patrick Ward, Daniel Moynihan and Dennis Cashman. Emily Dickinson died on May 15, 1886.

EPILOGUE

Maggie Saves the Day. The incident of the daguerreotype is mentioned in *Ancestors' Brocades* by Millicent Todd Bingham (Harper and Bros., 1945).

Judge Tenderly. The title alludes, of course, to Emily Dickinson's poem sometimes referred to as her "Letter to the World." It is interesting, in examining her letters and poems, to bear in mind T. S. Eliot's comment that the capacity for writing poetry is rare, as is the capacity for religious emotion, and the appearance of both capacities in one individual rarer still.

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Note: For a comprehensive bibliography, complete through 1968, consult Willis J. Buckingham, ed., *Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Bibliography*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970. Excellent selective bibliographies are found in Jay Leyda's work cited above, and in Richard B. Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974, 1980. Subscription to *Dickinson Studies* (formerly *Emily Dickinson Bulletin*) and *Higginson Journal* brings contact with a world-wide network of scholars of Dickinson's work and provides outlet for the publication of profiles and studies: address inquiries to Frederick L. Morey, 4508 38th Street, Brentwood, Maryland 20722, U.S.A.