

*IS MY VERSE  
ALIVE?*

ADAPTED BY STEVE BURCH  
FROM THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS WENTWORTH  
HIGGINSON AND EMILY DICKINSON

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### Characters\*

Thomas Higginson (TH), he was 66 years old when he began work with Todd on the anthology; he was 38 when Emily first wrote him.

Emily Dickinson (ED), she was 31 when she wrote to Higginson, and 55 when she died

Mabel Loomis Todd (MT), was 34 when she co-edited the anthology

\*The present tense of the play – Scene One and the end of Scene Three - is 1890 when Higginson is 66. Emily only appears in the past tense. In both cases the characters age but the actors do and should not (i.e., make-up, change of clothes, etc.). So go with your best actor for each role, regardless of their actual age.

Notes:

This is a love story between two people who could not express let alone acknowledge their attraction.

This is also the story of the creation of a book, one of the four pillars of American writing. I began this in the spring of 2012 after reading a reprint of Thomas Higginson's "Emily Dickinson's Letters" from the *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891. What impressed me was the extent that their epistolary relationship had an arc to it of repressed passion (erotic and romantic) which Dickinson and Higginson could only express in their writings to each other. I hastily scratched out a draft, intending it as a possible play of letter readings between these two characters, but I quickly abandoned that idea.

Some months went by. Then in a conversation with a colleague, I realized that what I was missing was a third character (Mabel Loomis Todd) and at least some scenes where Dickinson and Higginson actually talk and interact together. Which they actually did. Twice. After this next draft, I was steered to two wonderful books, *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, by Brenda Wineapple and *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* by Peter Gay. Their books did not alter my storyline or its conclusions, but each deepened my understanding of these three remarkable people.

Right now, approximately 90-95% of the dialogue comes straight from the letters and some poems and diary excerpts. I have taken some dramatic license in carving out my narrative, but, perhaps surprisingly, very little. Their second meeting has no documentation, other than it happened. The events during that meeting are the only purely fictional element of the play (though I have streamlined characters and shifted some times, e.g., not getting into Higginson's second marriage after Mary's death or Dickinson's late engagement, placing the first meeting between Higginson and Todd at a later date than actually occurred, etc.). But I think the story is true, or close enough to true though I am sure my interpretation of Emily is only hampered by my own limitations.

*Setting: The Library at the Dickinson Homestead, an American mid-Victorian parlor. There is a desk and chair behind it. Next to it is a book stand. There is a chair in front of it as well. And an embroidered couch. It is 1890.*

*There is a rear screen for projections of images and dates.*

**SCENE ONE:**

*Lights come up on a man in his 60s standing in darkness, facing out to the audience. His face looks anguished. He stands at attention, not sure what to do. An attractive and energetic woman in her late 20s enters the room. She sits at a desk and opens a folder.*

MT

Hello. Mr. Higginson. I'm Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd. We met almost four years ago. At the service.

TH

I remember seeing you there. But I don't recollect an occasion that we spoke to each other.

MT

We did not. Would you like to sit down?

TH

Yes, thank you. *(He sits on the couch.)*

MT

*(reads from the folder)* You were a minister once.

TH

I was a minister for the Unitarian church.

MT

But not any more?

TH

Not officially. No.

MT

You were also an abolitionist?

TH

*(rises, warily)* I was an abolitionist, and argued and sacrificed for the cause. I helped fugitive slaves to escape to Canada. I feel sure that your file tells you that I gave money to Mr. Brown for his war and to his trial defense after Harpers Ferry. My proudest day – I received this sabre cut on my chin in Boston trying to keep a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns, from being dragged back into that inferno. . . .<sup>1</sup> You know there was scarcely a day we didn't have a fugitive Negro in our home.

MT

How interesting. What were they like?

TH

*(quiet)* Intensely human.<sup>2</sup>

MT

That's quite condescending, Mr. Higginson.

TH

If you knew them, Mrs. Todd, these men and women who had tested their courage in the lonely swamp against the alligator and the bloodhound, who starved on prairies, hidden in holds, clung to locomotives, ridden hundreds of miles cramped in boxes, heads downward, equally near to death if discovered or deserted, - and who then, after enduring all this, voluntarily went back to risk it over again, for the sake of wife or child, - what are we pale faces, that we should claim a rival capacity with theirs for heroic deeds?<sup>3</sup> (Silence.) Every one must have something to which his dreams can cling, amid the degradations of actual life, and this tie is more real than the degradation; and if he holds to the tie, it will one day save him.

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<sup>1</sup> Wineapple, Brenda. *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. Anchor Books. New York. 2009. 82-86.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>3</sup> Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "Physical Courage." *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1858. p. 728.

MT

*(impressed)* “Intensely human.” Indeed. You were never tried for sedition, were you? To finance a terrorist attack on United States soil and not be brought to trial? That seems odd.

TH

Nothing odd about it. They hanged Brown and they wanted this whole thing to vanish. To try citizens for their abolitionist beliefs meant that those beliefs would get an airing in courts and in the popular press. I think our government just wanted the entire business to disappear. John Brown’s body lies a moldering in his grave. End of story.

MT

But it wasn’t, was it? It was only the beginning.

TH

Only the beginning. *(Pause.)* When war was declared, I enlisted, and rose to command the first Negro soldiers’ unit. I fought. Was wounded twice. I spoke out in favor of equal rights for all slaves. And for women, too. One half of the human race without even the basic rights. I said a woman must be a slave or an equal; there is no middle ground. If it is plainly reasonable that the two sexes shall study together in the same high school, then it cannot be hopelessly ridiculous that they should study together in college also. If it be common sense to make a woman deputy postmaster, then it cannot be the climax of absurdity to make her postmaster general, or even a higher officer who is the postmaster’s master. And of the men who would stand in her way? They are primarily anxious about whether an educated woman, happy and productive, would still make them dinner. I, too, wish to save the dinner. Yet it seems more important, after all, to save the soul.<sup>4</sup> I lived my life . . . I married a good woman, who was sickly and who suffered. I warned Mary when I proposed to her. I said to her that setting out with an entire resolution never to be intimidated into shutting either my eyes or my mouth, it is proper to consider the chance of my falling out with the world. And still she said Yes.<sup>5</sup> I loved her and she taught me much. But . . . I don’t know any more. *(He stares at her.)*

MT

You have written a great many books. About the war, your beliefs in the equality of the races and of women . . . You have just been quoting from them, haven't you?

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<sup>4</sup> Higginson. *Woman and Her Wishes: An Essay Inscribed to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention*. Boston. Robert F. Wallcut. 1853

<sup>5</sup> Wineapple. p. 28.

TH

Yes. More or less.

MT

Mr. Higginson, you know who I am?

TH

Yes. You are her brother's . . . friend.

MT

*(smiles to herself)* Can't even bring yourself to say it? Everyone else does in Amherst, only not to my face. I am her brother's lover.<sup>6</sup>

TH

Oh?

MT

*(points across the room to the couch)* For six years. Monday through Friday - sometimes the Sabbath, too – at 2:30 each afternoon we meet here and he woos me and boards me on that sofa. "A most exquisitely happy and satisfactory two hours."

TH

*(nonplussed)* No doubt plaques attesting that fact will someday replace "George Washington Slept Here."

MT

Why won't you look at the sofa?

TH

Is there already a plaque over it?

MT

You think I'm a crude woman. Coarseness in her speech and her manners.

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<sup>6</sup> Gay, Peter. *Education of the Senses: The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*. Volume One. New York. W.W. Norton. 1984. pp. 71-108. Gay's description and analysis of Mabel Loomis Todd comes from her journals and letters.

TH

I was a soldier, Mrs. Todd. Coarseness in women and in men is not uncommon to me.

MT

The way in which Austin loves me is a consecration – it is the holy of holies.<sup>7</sup> It is not a coarseness. *(Pause.)* You may ask me the question.

TH

Which one?

MT

What other one is there? Did she know?

TH

Mrs. Dickinson?

MT

Miss. His sister, the batty one, not his wife.

TH

*(giving in)* Did she know?

MT

I don't know, really. She did make a point of never leaving her room upstairs for those two hours each day. Did she never tell you this?

TH

Why am I here?

MT

Never hinted that her brother was tearing the family apart? And all for the smell of my cunny?

TH

Good day, Mrs. Todd.

*He begins to exit the room.*

MT

Don't you get all priggish on me, you phony holier than thou 'gentleman.' *(He stops.)* You were

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Wineapple from Todd's journals. *White Heat*. p. 239

her . . . 'friend.' Don't you tell me you two weren't making the beast with two backs on those visits. Even as your Mary lay dying, you were seducing that poor little bird.

TH

*(speechless)* I never . . . seduced her. We never had any kind of affair. We were friends. Just friends. I was her, her 'preceptor.' For Heaven's sake . . . we didn't even meet each other until we had been corresponding for, oh, eight years, we met for an hour that first time. And my Mary was here, with me.

MT

And the second time?

TH

Barely thirty minutes . . .

MT

*(overlapping)* And when you left, she howled like an animal, all night long.

TH

No! The problem with men and women like you, Mrs. Todd, is that you always think that all men and women are like you, Mrs. Todd. But you never met her, did you, Mrs. Todd? No, of course you didn't. Not even in those moments of 'consecrated' bliss with her brother would he have talked about her.

MT

Oh, he talked, alright. About his precious Emily. And Lavinia. And Susan. But he didn't have to. 'Cuz I've got 'em.

TH

*(alarmed)* What have you got?

MT

Ah, now the preceptor's interested.

TH

What have you got?

MT

There are capacities in me, I know, which I've not yet begun to feel. I shall yet do something which will be heard of – that I know.

TH

*(impressed)* What have you got?

MT

Poems. *(Long pause.)* Her poems. *(Long pause.)* Thousands of them. *(Long pause.)* And letters. All given to *me*. No, not by Austin. By his sister, the other one. Lavinia.

TH

Why? Why you?

MT

Maybe because the sainted wife and brother don't want to be burdened with them?

*TH walks slowly around the room, taking in all the repercussions. He approaches the sofa, looks over at MT, then seats himself on the edge of the sofa.*

TH

You need an editor. You can't read them. And you need an editor who can. You need me.

*MT rises.*

MT

"Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." *(She crosses to the sofa, standing over TH.)* "The truth must dazzle gradually, or all men be blind." Get up from the sofa. That's my place. *My* hallowed place. *(He stands, shakily.)* You can't have me. But you can have her, again. The only way you know how. But to read them, you need to negotiate with me. *Me!* Can't read them? I can read both you *and* her! You're a hero, right? You mustered up your conscience and told yourself that you were saving the black man. As if salvation were yours to give. You couldn't save the Negro any more than you could save her. You wanted her and all for yourself. You told her not to bother publishing. Didn't you? You were a god to her, you know. You could have done something, something to rescue her from this tomb. But you did not. Did you? *(No response.)* Did you never inquire about the dreams she clung to? *(No response.)* I thought not. *(She pulls out a letter from a pocket in her dress.)* We never met but she wrote me a letter once. I had given her a print through her brother. Of some flowers. Would you like to read it? *(Pause. He doesn't move. She reads.)* "I know not how to thank you. We do not thank the rainbow, although its trophy is a snare. To give delight is hallowed – perhaps the toil of angels, whose

avocations are concealed. I trust you are well, and the little girl with the deep eyes, every day more fathomless.”<sup>8</sup> You smile, Mr. Higginson.

TH

She has been dead these four years. But to hear her voice again . . . .That is a precious gift you have in your hands Mrs. Todd.

MT

You have many friends in the publishing business, Mr. Higginson. That’s why I asked you here. I’m going to publish her poems, with or without your editorial help. A little judicious pruning of her grammatical strangeness, put some titles on them. Say yes to me and you get to read ‘em. She’s been dead for four years. And now, now you get to close your eyes, breathe in her scent and be with her again, one last time. (*She crosses to the door.*) Thousands of them. Unread by anyone else. Walk out on me? Walk out on her?

*MT exits. Lights go down except for the spotlight on TH.*

TH

I never . . . Never . . .

## SCENE TWO:

*On the rear screen we see two photographs side by side: of Thomas Higginson on the left and Emily Dickinson on the right. Music plays softly, perhaps the piano version of ‘Down a Country Lane’ by Aaron Copland. As he speaks, the images are replaced with the date—April 16, 1862. He sits in Mabel’s chair and wipes his brow. He attempts to control his breathing.*

TH

One day my life changed but I never knew it until this minute. Early in 1862 I had written an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly* called “Letter to a Young Contributor,” giving modest advice. On April 16, 1862, I took from the post office the following letter —<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson, Emily. *Selected Poems and Letters*. Ed. Robert N. Linscott. New York. Anchor Books. 1959. p. 318.

<sup>9</sup> Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. “Emily Dickinson’s Letters.” *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings*. New York. Penguin Books. 1997. Much of scenes two and three come directly from this essay, written in 1890 on the publication of the first volume of Dickinson’s poems.

ED (*speaking from shadows*)

Mr. Higginson, Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? The mind is so near itself it cannot see distinctly, and I have none to ask.

Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.

If I make the mistake, that you dared to tell me would give me sincerer honor toward you.

I enclose my name, asking you, if you please sir, to tell me what is true?

That you will not betray me it is needless to ask, since honor is its own pawn.

TH

The letter was postmarked "Amherst," and 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 of that college town. Yet it was not in the slightest degree illiterate, but cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique. Of punctuation there was little; she used chiefly dashes, and so with her habit as to capitalization, as the printers call it. But the most curious thing about the letter was the total absence of a signature. It proved, however, that she had written her name on a card, and put it under the shelter of a smaller envelope enclosed in the larger; and even this name was written – as if the shy writer wished to recede as far as possible from view – in pencil, not ink. (*He closes his eyes and repeats her name, as if each syllable were delectable.*) "Emily Dickinson." Enclosed with the letter were four poems, two of which have since been separately printed, - "Safe in their alabaster chambers" and "I'll tell you how the sun rose . . ."

The impression of a wholly new and original poetic genius was as distinct on my mind at the first reading of these four poems as it is now, after almost half a century of further knowledge; so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism. The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy more than she evaded me; and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy.

Circumstances, however, soon brought me in contact with an uncle of Emily Dickinson. He could tell but little of her, she being evidently an enigma to him, as to me. It is hard to say what answer was made by me to her letter. It is probably that I sought to gain time a little and find out with what strange creature I was dealing. I remember to have ventured on some criticism which she afterwards called "surgery," and on some questions, part of which she evaded with a naïve skill such as the most experienced and worldly coquette might envy.

*She emerges into the lighted room.*

ED

Mr. Higginson, Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude, but I was ill, and write today from my pillow.

Thank you for the surgery; it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others, as you ask, though they might not differ. While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb.

You asked how old I was? I made no verse but one or two, until this winter, sir.

I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid.

You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations. I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education. When 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.

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.

I have a brother and a sister; my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. He buys me many books, but begs me not to read them, because he fears they joggle the mind. They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their "Father."

But I fear my story fatigues you. I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it unconveyed, like melody or witchcraft?

You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but was told it was disgraceful.

Two editors of journals came to my father's house this winter, and asked me for my mind, and when I asked them "why" they said I was penurious, and they would use it for the world.

I could not weigh myself, myself. My size felt small to me. I read your chapters in the "Atlantic," and experienced honor for you. I was sure you would not reject a confiding question.

Is this, sir, what you asked me to tell you? Your friend, E. Dickinson.

TH

It will be seen that she had now drawn a step nearer, signing her name, and as my “friend.” It will also be noticed that I had sounded her about certain American authors, then much read; and that she knew how to put her own criticisms in a very trenchant way. With this letter came some more verses, still in the same birdlike script . . . .

It is possible that in a second letter I gave more of distinct praise or encouragement, as her third is in a different mood.

[SCREEN: June 8, 1862]

ED

Dear Friend, Your letter gave no drunkenness, because I tasted rum before. Yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue.

My dying tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but Death was as much of a mob as I could master, then.

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung. I had not supposed it. Your first gave no dishonor, because the true are not ashamed. I thanked you for your justice, but could not drop the bells whose jingling cooled my tramp. Perhaps the balm seemed better, because you bled me first. I smile when you suggest that I delay “to publish,” that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin.

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.

Would you not have time to be the “friend” you should think I need? I have a little shape: it would not crowd your desk, nor make much racket as the mouse that dens your galleries.

If I might bring you what I do – not so frequent to trouble you – and ask you if I told it clear, ‘t would be control to me. The sailor cannot see the North, but knows the needle can. The “hand you stretch me in the dark” I put mine in, and turn away. I have no Saxon now: -

“As if I asked a common alms,/ And in my wandering hand/A stranger pressed a kingdom, And I,  
bewildered, stand;/ As if I asked the Orient/ Had it for me a morn,/ And it should lift its purple  
dikes/ And shatter me with dawn!”

But will you be my preceptor, Mr. Higginson?

TH

With this came the poem since published in one of her volumes and entitled "Renunciation"; and also that beginning "Of all the sounds dispatched abroad," thus fixing approximately the date of those two. I must have soon written to ask her for her picture, that I might form some impression of my enigmatical correspondent. To this came the following reply—

[SCREEN: July 1862]

ED

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?

It often alarms father. He says death might occur and he has moulds of all the rest, but has no mould of me.

You said : "Dark." I know the butterfly, and the lizard, and the orchid. Are not those *your* countrymen?

I am happy to be your scholar, and will deserve the kindness I cannot repay.

If you truly consent, I recite now. Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince than die. Men do not call the surgeon to commend the bone, but to set it, sir, and fracture within is more critical. And for this, preceptor, I shall bring you obedience, the blossom from my garden, and every gratitude I know.

Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that. My business is circumference. An ignorance, not of customs, but if caught with the dawn, or the sunset see me, myself the only kangaroo among the beauty, sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought that instruction would take it away.

Because you have much business, beside the growth of me, you will appoint, yourself, how often I shall come without your inconvenience.

And if at any time you regret you received me, or I prove a different fabric to that you supposed, you must banish me.

Today makes yesterday mean.

To thank you baffles me. Are you perfectly powerful? Had I pleasure you had not, I could delight to bring it.

Your Scholar.

TH

It would seem at first I tried a little – a very little – to lead her in the direction of rules and traditions; but I fear it was only perfunctory, and that she interested me more in her – so to speak – unregenerate condition. Still, she recognized the endeavor. In this case, as will be seen, I called her attention to the fact that while she took pains to correct the spelling of a word, she was utterly careless of greater irregularities. It will be seen by her answer that with her usual naïve adroitness she turns my point: -

ED

Dear Friend, - Are these more orderly? I thank you for the truth.

I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself; and when I try to organize, my little force explodes and leaves me bare and charred.

I think you call me “wayward.” Will you help me improve?

You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large. Because I can see orthography; but the ignorance out of sight is my preceptor’s charge.

Of “shunning men and women,” they talk of hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my dog. He and I don’t object to them, if they’ll exist their side. I think Carlo would please you. He is dumb, and brave. I think you would like the chestnut tree I met in my walk. It hit my notice suddenly, and I thought the skies were in blossom.

Then there’s a noiseless noise in the orchard that I let persons hear.

You told me in one letter you could not come to see me “now,” and I made no answer; not because I had none, but did not think myself the price that you should come so far.

I do not ask so large a pleasure, lest you might deny me.

You say, “Beyond your knowledge.” You would not jest with me, because I believe you; but, preceptor, you cannot mean it?

All men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion.

When much in the woods, as a little girl, I was told that the snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or goblins kidnap me; but I went along and met no one but angels, who

were far shyer of me than I could be of them, so I haven't that confidence in fraud which many exercise.

I shall observe your precept, though I don't understand it, always.

I marked a line in one verse, because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person.

I do not let it go, because it is mine. Have you the portrait of Mrs. Browning?

Persons sent me three. If you had none, will you have mine?

Your Scholar.

[SCREEN: several shots of Civil War battlefields strewn with corpses after the fighting. There are the sounds of distant cannon fire.]

TH

A month or two after this I entered the volunteer army of the Civil War, and must have written to her during the winter of 1862-63 from South Carolina or Florida, for the following reached me in camp:

ED

Dear Friend –I should have liked to see you before you became improbable. War feels to me an oblique place. Should there be other summers, would you perhaps come?

I found you were gone, by accident. Carlo still remained, and I told him.

“Best gains must have the losses' test,/ To constitute them gains.”

My shaggy ally assented.

Perhaps death gave me awe for friends, striking sharp and early, for I held them since in a brittle love, of more alarm than peace. I trust you may pass the limit of war; and though not reared to prayer, when service is had in church for our arms, I include yourself . . . I was thinking today, as I noticed, that the “Supernatural” was only the Natural disclosed.

“Not ‘Revelation’ ‘t is that waits,/ But our unfurnished eyes.”

But I fear I detain you. Should you, before this reaches you, experience immortality, who will inform me of the exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid death, I entreat you, sir. It would bereave.

Your Gnome.

TH

I cannot explain this extraordinary signature, substituted for the now customary 'Your Scholar,' unless she imagined her friend to be in some incredible and remote condition, imparting its strangeness to her. With this letter came verses, most refreshing in that clime of jasmines and mockingbirds, on the familiar robin.

In the summer of 1863 I was wounded, and in hospital for a time, during which came this letter in pencil, written from what was practically a hospital for her, though only for weak eyes:

[SCREEN: Summer 1863]

ED

Dear Friend – Are you in danger? I did not know that you were hurt. Will you tell me more? Mr. Hawthorne died.

I was ill since September, and since April in Boston for a physician's care. He does not let me go, yet I work in my prison, and make guests for myself.

Carlo did not come, because that he would die in jail; and the mountains I could not hold now, so I brought but the Gods.

I wish to see you more than before I failed. Will you tell me your health? I am surprised and anxious since receiving your note.

"The only news I know/ Is bulletins all day/ From immortality."

Can you render my pencil? The physician has taken away my pen.

I enclose the address from a letter, lest my figures fail.

Knowledge of your recovery would excel my own.

E. Dickinson

TH

Later this arrived –

ED

Dear Friend - I think of you so wholly that I cannot resist to write again, to ask if you are safe? Danger is not at first, for then we are unconscious, but in the after, slower days.

Do not try to be saved, but let redemption find you, as it certainly will. Love is its own rescue; for we, at our supremest, are but its trembling emblems.

Your Scholar

TH

These were my earliest letters from Emily Dickinson, in their order. From this time and up to her death we corresponded at varying intervals, she always persistently keeping up the attitude of "Scholar," and assuming on my part a preceptorship which it is almost needless to say did not exist. Always glad to hear her "recite," as she called it, I soon abandoned all attempt to guide in the slightest degree this extraordinary nature, and simply accepted her confidences, giving as much as I could of what might interest her, in return.

Sometimes there would be a long pause, on my part, after which would come a plaintive letter, always terse, like this:

ED

Did I displease you? But won't you tell me how?

TH

Or perhaps the announcement of some event, vast in her small sphere, as this :

ED

Carlo died.

Would you instruct me now?

TH

Or sometimes there would arrive an exquisite little detached strain, every word a picture:

ED

The Humming Bird

“A route of evanescence/ With a revolving wheel;/ A resonance of emerald;/ A rush of cochineal./ And every blossom on the bush/ Adjusts its tumbled head;-/ The mail from Tunis, probably,/ An easy morning’s ride.”

TH

Nothing in literature, I am sure, so condenses into a few words that gorgeous atom of life and fire of which she here attempts the description. It is, however, needless to conceal that many of her brilliant fragments were less satisfying. She almost always grasped whatever she sought, but with some fracture of grammar and discovery on the way. Often, too, she was obscure, and sometimes inscrutable; and though obscurity is sometimes, in Coleridge’s phrase, a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press this compliment too hard.

Sometimes, on the other hand, her verses found too much favor for her comfort, and she was urged to publish. In such cases I was sometimes put forward as a defense; and the following letter was the fruit of some such occasion:

ED

Dear Friend – Thank you for the advice. I shall implicitly follow it.

The one who asked me for the lines I had never seen.

He spoke of “a charity.” I refused, but did not inquire. He again earnestly urged, on the ground that in that way I might “aid unfortunate children.” The name of “child” was a snare to me, and I hesitated, choosing my most rudimentary, and without criterion.

I inquired of you. You can scarcely estimate the opinion to one utterly guideless. Again thank you.

Your Scholar

TH

Again came this, on a similar theme:

ED

Dear Friend – Are you willing to tell me what is right? Mrs. Jackson of Colorado wished me to write for this circular of the “No Name Series.” I told her I was unwilling, and she asked me why? I said I was incapable, and she seemed not to believe me and asked me not to decide for a few days. Meantime, she would write me. She was so sweetly noble, I would regret to estrange her,

and if you would be willing to give me a note saying you disapproved it, and thought me unfit, she would believe you. I am sorry to flee so often to my safest friend, but hope he permits me.

TH

In all this time – nearly eight years – we had never met, but she had sent many invitations.

ED

Dear Friend – Whom my dog understood could not elude others.

I should be so glad to see you, but think it an apparitional pleasure, not to be fulfilled. I am uncertain about Boston.

I had promised to visit my physician for a few days in May, but father objects because he is in the habit of me.

Is it more far to Amherst?

You will find a minute host, but a spacious welcome . . . .

If I still entreat you to teach me, are you much displeased? I will be patient, constant, never reject your knife, and should my slowness goad you, you knew before myself that

“Except the smaller size/ No lives are round./ These hurry to a sphere/ And show and end./ The larger slower grow/ And later hang;/ The summers of Hesperides/ Are long.”

TH

Afterwards came this:

ED

Dear Friend – A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. There seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone. I would like to thank you for your great kindness, but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold.

Should you come to Amherst, I might then succeed, though gratitude is the timid wealth of those who have nothing. I am sure that you speak the truth, because the noble do, but your letters always surprise me.

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

You noticed my dwelling alone. You speak kindly of seeing me; could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst, I should be very glad, but I do not cross my father's ground to any house or town.

Of our greatest acts we are ignorant. You were not aware that you saved my life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests . . . You will excuse each that I say, because no one taught me.

*She steps back into the shadows.*

[SCREEN: August 16, 1870]

TH

At last, after many postponements, I found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent. It was at her father's house, 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.

[Music: Copland]

*She steps haltingly into the light as he turns toward her. It is as if they were now back at that meeting. The lights come up revealing the same room as in the interview. He holds his hat in his hand.*

After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, 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 nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order.

*She steps toward him and hands him the flowers which she puts in a child-like way.*

ED

These are my introduction. Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say. Oh, please do sit.

*She sits on the sofa at one end, and he sits after her on the other end. Silence, as they regard each other. He smiles encouragingly at her. Her eyes dart everywhere in the room except at him.*

TH

This is very nice. The room. Your library? The house. *(Pause.)* Tell me a little something about your early life. About yourself. Do you ever show your poems to your family? Your mother? Father?

ED

Oh. My father is our sun – the universe revolves around him. He is a man who reads on Sunday “lonely and rigorous books”; and who had from childhood inspired me with such awe, that I never learned to tell time by the clock till I was fifteen, simply because he had tried to explain it to me when I was a little child, and I had been afraid to tell him that I did not understand, and I was also afraid to ask any one else lest he should hear of it. Yet I never heard him speak a harsh word. My mother was weak. I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled. He did not wish his children, when little, to read anything but the Bible. *(Pause.)* 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. Afterwards when I regained my eyes, I read Shakespeare and thought to myself, why is any other book needed?

TH

Yes. Shakespeare is good. Wonderful poet.

*Pause.*

ED

Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds? *(Pause.)* Truth is such a rare thing, it is delightful to tell it. *(Pause.)* I find ecstasy in living; the mere sense of living is joy enough.

TH

Did you never feel any want of employment, not going off the grounds and rarely seeing a visitor?

ED

I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time. *(Pause.)* I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough.

TH *(looks around, searching for a topic)*

What do you do . . . around the house? What makes up your day?

ED

Well, my household occupations, I make all our bread, because father likes only mine. And puddings. People must have puddings, so I make them. How do most people live without any thoughts? There are many people in the world – you must have noticed them in the street – how do they live? How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning?

*He is unable to answer her.*

ED

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?<sup>10</sup>

*Another pause. He stands and picks up his hat. They smile nervously at each other. He offers his hand which she barely touches and then hastily withdraws her hand. He bows stiffly to her. She looks down. He moves to his earlier position to talk to the audience.*

TH

I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before – on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life.

The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of something abnormal. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods.

*She moves away from him to her position earlier in the play.*

After my visit came this letter:

ED

Enough is so vast a sweetness, I suppose it never occurs, only pathetic counterfeits.

After you went, I took "Macbeth" and turned to "Birnam Wood." Came twice "To Dunsinane." I thought and went about my work . . . .

---

<sup>10</sup> Wineapple. p. 179-180.

The vein cannot thank the artery, but her solemn indebtedness to him, even the stolidest admit, and so of me who try, whose effort leaves no sound.

You ask great questions accidentally. To answer them would be events. I trust that you are safe.

I ask you to forgive me for all the ignorance I had. I find no nomination sweet as your low opinion.

Speak, if but to blame your obedient child.

If I ask too much, you could please refuse. Shortness to live has made me bold.

Abroad is close tonight and I have but to lift my hands to touch the "Heights of Abraham."

Dickinson

TH

When I said at parting, that I would come again some time, she replied,

ED

Say, in a long time; that will be nearer. Some time is no time.

TH

We met only once again. Three years later. I have no express record of the visit.

*Lights up on the parlor. As before. They stand stiffly, not looking at each other. We hear the ticking of a clock throughout this scene.*

ED

How long are you going to stay?

TH

Not too long I'm afraid. I presented a lecture this afternoon on women's suffrage at the college. And I am heading off shortly for New York. I wanted to see you, especially since I was here.

*They stand awkwardly for a moment.*

ED

Please sit down.

*As before on the sofa. They sit and look about the room.*

ED

Your wife? Is she well? Has she accompanied you?

TH

No. I am afraid not. She seems to be slowly losing control of her muscles. She sits in a special chair. I carry her up and down the stairs. This is not new, I'm afraid.

ED

I am so sorry to hear this.

TH

Thank you.

ED

You have . . . . there are no . . . . forgive me, I am ashamed at my prying . . . .

TH

There are no children. Mary never . . .wanted them.

ED

But, did you not . . . . ? *(She covers her face.)*

TH

I have no right to demand . . . *(Pause.)* My unattainable thoughts, unread by words.

*Suddenly they find each other looking into the other's face, searching as if for an answer, or a clue. We can hear only their breathing and a clock.*

ED

I would like to be what you deem me.

TH

It is hard for me to understand how you can live so alone with thoughts of such a quality coming up in you.

ED

To escape enchantment one must always flee. There is so much sadness in my preceptor's face.

TH

*(hoarsely)* And such beauty . . . in yours. Could we but reach and touch that wayward will on earth so hard to touch.

*The tension increases. They continue to stare at each other.*

TH

Would she be found controlled or yet impetuous, free or bound, tameless as ocean, or serene and still?

*Slowly they begin to lean towards each other. ED tentatively reaches out her hand. TH reaches out and places his open hand against hers. She traces his palm, then reaches out, putting her fingertips against his cheek. TH flinches and she removes her hand as if from a searing flame and immediately covers her face from shame, as he quickly stands.*

TH

I must go now. I . . . My Mary . . . ! Can't . . . !

ED

*(hisses at him)* Go!

TH

I will not forget you. Especially the time spent with you. It seemed before to give you some happiness . . . . Each time we seem to come together as old and true friends, and I certainly feel that I have known you long and well, through the beautiful thoughts and words you have sent me. I hope you will not cease to trust me and turn to me; and I will try to speak the truth to you, and with love.<sup>11</sup>

ED

*(screams at him)* Just go!

*He leaves. She hugs herself tightly, opens her mouth to scream, but a lone sob drowns out her torment. She furiously begins to beat herself all over with her fists until she stops from exhaustion. [This may last as long as thirty seconds.] Lights down. TH resumes his position as before.*

### SCENE THREE:

MT

*In the shadows.*

She howled like an animal, all through the night.

TH

---

<sup>11</sup> Wineapple. p. 193.

You weren't even there. You hadn't even come to Amherst yet.

MT

Austin was there. He told me.

TH

Everyone must have something to which his dreams can cling, amid the degradations of actual life, and this tie is more real than the degradations, and if he holds to the tie, it will one day save him. *(Pause.)* We continued to correspond for years, after long intervals of silence, her side of the intercourse being, I fear, better sustained.

ED

Because that you are going/ And never coming back/ And I, however absolute/ May overlook  
your Track-

Because that Death is final,/ However first it be/ This instant be suspended/ Above Mortality.

Significance that each has lived/ The other to detect/ Discovery not God himself/ Could now  
annihilate

Eternity, Presumption/ The instant I perceive/ That you, who were Existence/ Yourself forgot to  
live-

The "Life that is" will then have been/ A Thing I never knew-/ As Paradise fictitious/ Until the  
Realm of you-

The "Life that is to be," to me,/ A Residence too plain/ Unless in my Redeemer's Face/ I  
recognize your own.

Of Immortality who doubts/ He may exchange with me/ Curtailed by your obscuring Face/ Of  
Everything but He-

Of Heaven and Hell I also yield/ The Right to reprehend/ To whoso would commute this Face/  
For his less priceless Friend.

If "God is Love" as he admits/ We think that he must be/ Because he is a "jealous God"/ He tells  
us certainly

If "All is possible with" him/ As he besides concedes/ He will refund us finally/ Our confiscated  
Gods-

TH

She sometimes also wrote to Mary, my wife, enclosing flowers or fragrant leaves with a verse or  
two. Once she sent her one of George Eliot's books, I think "Middlemarch," and wrote

ED

I am bringing you a little granite book for you to lean upon.

TH

At other times she would send single poems. My Mary died after a long illness, in 1877 after many years as an invalid. Shortly before then Emily wrote to me, thanking me for giving her permission to write to Mary.

ED

I am glad if I did as you would like. The degradation to displease you, I hope I may never incur.

TH

Our correspondence had become sporadic, more so than before. Two years later I sent her a new book of mine. She responded.

ED

Had I tried before reading your gift to thank you, it had been possible, but I waited, and now it disables my lips. Magic, as it electrifies, also makes decrepit. I look at the photograph you enclosed. Your Face is more joyful, when you speak. Thank you for thinking of me.

[SCREEN: June 15, 1874]

TH

Before this, before Mary's death, however, came the death of Emily's father, that strong Puritan father who had communicated to her so much of the vigor of his own nature, and who bought her many books, but begged her not to read them. Soon afterwards, I received the following letter:

ED

The last afternoon that my father lived, though with no premonition, I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for mother, Vinnie – my sister – being asleep. He seemed particularly pleased, as I oftenest stayed with myself; and remarked, as the afternoon withdrew, he "would like it not to end."

His pleasure almost embarrassed me, and my brother coming, I suggested they walk. Next morning I woke him for the train, and saw him no more.

His heart was pure and terrible, and I think no other like it exists.

I am glad there is immortality, but would have tested it myself, before entrusting him.

I have wished for you, since my father died, and had you an hour unengrossed, it would be almost priceless. Thank you for each kindness . . . .

TH

Later she wrote:

ED

When I think of my father's lonely life and lonelier death, there is redress –

“Take all away;/ The only thing worth larceny/ Is left – the immortality.”

My earliest friend wrote me the week before he died, “If I live, I will go to Amherst; if I die, I certainly will.”

Is your house deeper off?

Your Scholar

TH

A year afterwards came this:

[SCREEN: 1875]

ED

Dear Friend – Mother was paralyzed Tuesday, a year from the evening father died. I thought perhaps you would care.

Your Scholar

TH

With this came the following verse:

ED

“A death-blow is a life-blow to some,/ Who, till they died, did not alive become;/ Who, had they lived, had died, but when/ They died, vitality begun.”

TH

And later came this kindred memorial of one of the oldest and most faithful friends of the family, Mr. Samuel Bowles, of the Springfield "Republican":

ED

Dear Friend – I felt it shelter to speak to you.

My brother and sister are with Mr. Bowles, who is buried this afternoon.

The last song that I had heard – that was, since the birds – was "He leadeth me, he leadeth me; yea, though I walk" – then the voices stooped, the arch was so low.

TH

After this added bereavement the inward life of the diminished household became only more concentrated, and the world was held farther and farther away.

[SCREEN: 1880]

ED

Dear Friend – I was touchingly reminded of a child who had died this morning by an Indian woman with gay baskets and a dazzling baby, at the kitchen door. Her little boy "once died," she said, death to her dispelling him. I asked her what the baby liked, and she said "to step." The prairie before the door was gay with flowers of hay, and I led her in. She argued with the birds, she leaned on clover walls and they fall, and dropped her. With jargon sweeter than a bell, she grappled buttercups, and they sank together, the buttercups the heaviest. What sweetest use of days! 'T was noting some such scene made Vaughan humbly say, -

"My days that are at best but dim and hoary."

I think it was Vaughan . . . .

[SCREEN: May 15, 1886]

TH

And these fragmentary memorials – closing, like every human biography, with funerals, yet with such as were to Emily Dickinson only the stately introduction to a higher life – may well end with her description of the death of the very summer she loved so.

ED

“As imperceptibly as grief/ The summer lapsed away,/ Too imperceptible at last/ To feel like perfidy.

A quietness distilled,/ As twilight long begun,/ Or Nature spending with herself/ Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,/ The morning foreign shone,/ A courteous yet harrowing grace/ As guest that would be gone.

And thus without a wing/ Or service of a keel/ Our summer made her light escape/ Into the Beautiful.”

*She retreats finally back into the shadows.*

TH

Her will requested that her coffin be “not driven but carried through fields of buttercups.” I read a favorite poem of hers by Emily Bronte: “There is not room for Death/Nor atom that his might could render void/Since thou art Being and Breath/And what thou art may never be destroyed.”

[SCREEN: the portraits of ED and TH as seen at the beginning of the play appear]

TH

Twenty-four years. We wrote to each other. Less so as the years went by. *(Pause.)* Mary once said, “Oh why do the insane cling to you?” She told her sister that “I don’t dare die and the leave the Colonel, there are so many women waiting for him.” She called her “my eccentric poetess.” For twenty-four years we corresponded. I was her preceptor. I who never really understood her poetry. Emily’s mind, her creativity, her soul, was like a mountain. No. A volcano spewing, erupting the most magnificent language and the most original mind. In comparison, I am but a tidy housekeeper. *(He chuckles. Then an extraordinary sob which rattles his entire frame bursts from him.)* We . . . . I gave Emily nothing.

*MT enters quietly and listens as he begins to cry. She carries a small chapbook.*

ED *(offstage)*

“You were not aware that you saved my life.”

TH

You saved *me*. *(whispers)* Sweet Jesus . . . . did I fail her, too? How could I have not seen this?

*Lights dim. Music from before is heard. A single spotlight remains momentarily on TH, anguished, wondering for the thousandth time, if ED loved him. MT walks to him and places her hands gently on his shoulders. He shudders and grieves.*

MT

“I should not dare to leave my friend/ Because – because if he should die/ While I was gone,  
and I – too late - / Should reach the heart that wanted me

If I should disappoint the eyes/ That hunted, hunted so, to see,/ And could not bear to shut  
until/ They “noticed” me – they noticed me”

I once heard that in some cultures if you saved someone’s life, it meant that you were obligated to them. Isn’t that odd? I’d think it was the other way round, that the person saved would be obligated to the person who saved them. You know, be grateful. But no. When you save someone’s life, *you* become obligated to *them*. She was our destiny. And you can save her. We both can. It’s time to bring her before the world.

*He nods silently as she strokes his head.*

TH

“Except to heaven, she is nought/ Except for angels, lone”

*Mabel joins in with Thomas.*

TH/MT

“Except to some wide-wandering bee/ A flower superfluous blown”

MT

*(gently)* We’ll both of us make her famous.

*She hands him the chapbook. He wipes away his tears and nods to her. He begins to read and immediately becomes engrossed. She sits at the table and watches him. Blackout. Music fades.*

**END OF PLAY**