

Some hidden poems OF EMILY DICKINSON

These are only some of the “poems” I extracted from Emily Dickinson’s letters. In the vast majority of cases, I broke the prose lines into what I thought would have been her poetic lines had she determined to write them as poetry. In some ways these would have been more courageous poetic forms, at least then, than her ‘poem’ poems, since the meter is much less conventional and Romantic-modern. She might have been too timid to undisguised this poetry, so she concealed it as prose, fearing negative criticism. The case can also be made that these were the only poems she actually intended for the world to see, since she instructed that the poems we know as hers she instructed be destroyed at her death. She intended her letters to be seen, at least by their recipients.

I should also point out that just after I finished collecting these “poems,” back in 1992-93, William H. Shur came out with a book titled “New Poems of Emily Dickinson.” In it, he mined the letters for poems the way I have done. He was more meticulous in his search for poetic structure, carving out hymn-style “Fourteeners” and epigrams and what he referred to as “workshop” unfinished semi-structured poems. I had a short correspondence with him when I learned his book had come out, but we didn’t see eye to eye. In my view, he missed a lot of good stuff, but we were both on the same track. His final chapter evaluates the critical work of others who recognized the poem-like qualities in many of the letters.

I still think the best thing is for everybody to have a fresh look at the correspondence and seek out their own poems. It’s a little like panning for gold in an ore-rich stream.

HY

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[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 26, 1862]

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.

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 26, 1862]

When a little girl, I had a friend
who taught me Immortality;
but venturing too near, himself,
he never returned.

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 26, 1862]

You ask of my companions.
Hills, sir, and the sundown,
and a dog large as myself,
that my father bought me.

They are better than beings
because they know, but do not tell.

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 26, 1862]

Could you tell me how to grow,
or is it unconveyed,
like melody
or witchcraft?

[11] [To Higginson, 1862?]

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 called me wayward.
Will you help me improve?
I suppose the pride that stops the breath
in the core of woods,
is not of ourself.

9

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, July, 1862]

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.

12

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1863?]

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,
as I find systems are,

or seasons of the year,
and obtain no cause,
but suppose it a treason of progress
that dissolves as it goes.

* * *

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.

14

[To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1863?]

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.

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[To Abiah Root, January, 1851]

Some of my friends are gone,
and some of my friends are sleeping
--sleeping the churchyard sleep
--the hour of evening is sad
--it was once my study hour
-- my master has gone to rest,
and the open leaf of the book,
and the scholar at school alone,
make the tears come,
and I cannot brush them away;
I would not if I could,
for they are the only tribute
I can pay

247

[To Austin, October 2, 1851]

The grapes, too, are fine,
juicy, and such a purple

-- I fancy the robes of kings
are not a tint more royal.
The vine looks like a kingdom,
with ripe round grapes for kings,
and hungry mouths for subjects
-- the first instance on record
of subjects devouring kings!

248-49

[To Austin, October, 1851]

The dust falls on the bureau
in your deserted room,
and gay, frivolous spiders
spin away in the corners.
I don't go there
after dark
whenever I can help it,
for the twilight
seems to pause there,
and I am half afraid;
and if ever I have to go,
I hurry with all my might,
and never look behind me,
for I know who I should see.

249

[To Austin, October, 1851]

You will find the blue hills [Austin]
with the autumnal shadows silently sleeping on them,
and there will be a glory lingering round the day,
so you'll know autumn has been here;
and the setting sun will tell you,
if you don't get home till evening.

249

[To Austin, October, 1851]

You would say 'twas a gloomy morning
if you were sitting here,
-- the frost has been severe,
and the few lingering leaves
seem anxious to be going,
and wrap their faded cloaks
more closely about them
as if to shield them
from the chilly northeast wind.

The earth looks like some poor old lady
who by dint of pains has bloomed
e'en till now,
yet in a forgetful moment
a few silver hairs
from out her cap come stealing,
and she tucks them back
so hastily
and thinks nobody sees.

The cows are going to pasture,
and little boys
with their hands in their pockets
are whistling
to try to keep warm.

Don't think that the sky will frown so
the day when you come home!

250

[To Austin, November 17, 1851]

We are thinking most of Thanksgiving
than anything else just now
-- how full will be the circle,
less then by none
-- how the things will smoke
--how the board will groan
with the thousand savory viands
-- how when the day is done,
lo, the evening cometh,
laden with merrie laugh
and happy conversation,
and then the sleep and the dream
each of a knight or "Ladie"
--how I love to see them,
a beautiful company
coming down the hill,
which men call the Future,
with their hearts full of joy
and their hands of gladness.
Thanksgiving indeed to a family
united once more together
before they go away.

262-63

[To Dr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland 1854]

I was walking with you
in the most wonderful garden,
and helping you pick -- roses,
and though we gathered
with all our might,
the basket was never full.
And so all day I pray
that I may walk with you,
and gather roses again,
and as night draws on,
it pleases me,
and I count impatiently
the hours 'tween me and the darkness,
and the dream of you and the roses,
and the basket never full.
God grant the basket fill not,
till, with hands purer and whiter,
we gather flowers of gold
in baskets made of pearl;
higher -- higher!