

Zero at the Bone

SYNOPSIS

Once upon a time there was a woman who did a fantastically creative thing. She did it so quietly that not even her family knew what she was up to. Whenever she wasn't with them or with a few close friends, she worked on her project.

She didn't go out.

She didn't travel.

She never married or had children.

When she died, her project was discovered. Her friends and family were astonished by its scope and depth; it seemed to address the totality of human feeling, from the loftiest spirituality to the most mischievous wit. Her project depicted every sort of action, from the tenderest love to the most abject cruelty. Her friends and family realized they had never truly known the woman who lived among them. They had been too busy with their own lives and loves to notice the monumental act of creation that happened right under their noses.

Nevertheless, they set about publishing the woman's work. It was very difficult at first because nobody had ever seen anything like it. The woman was dead, so they couldn't ask her questions. Scholars everywhere, even in far off lands, began to study the woman. For over a century, they quarreled and debated among themselves, seeking to understand the woman's "what," her "how," and her "wherefore."

Although she figures in the cast of characters, *Zero at the Bone* isn't much about the woman herself. It's about humans who live in proximity to someone whose unique gifts they utterly fail to recognize. It also looks at humans who struggle to calculate their debt to an artist of the past. In these ways, the play is about most of us.

It ends with a sort of oratorio that shows how the woman approached a particular set of problems in her work. This is as close as the play gets to explaining anything.

version 18
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ZERO AT THE BONE*(3m, 4f)**Characters*

GOULNORA DORDONA	40
ULUGBEK	54
JUDITH WERFF	51
WILL DARVIS	29
LYNN JAMISSON	27
JOHN ACKER	60
A BARTENDER (<i>played by the actor who plays Ulugbek</i>)	
A PHOTOGRAPHER	30

Gulnara, Ulugbek and the bartender are Uzbek. John is British. The photographer has very few lines. I've written them in French provisionally, but the actor could speak them in almost any language other than English.

And in act two...

EMILY (*played by the actor who plays the photographer*)

HIGGINSON (*played by the actor who plays Acker*)

MABEL (*played by the actor who plays Lynn*)

LAVINIA (*played by the actor who plays Judith*)

DAVID (*played by the actor who plays Will*)

SUE (*played by the actor who plays Goulnora*)

AUSTIN (*played by the actor who plays Ulugbek*)

The role of EMILY might be played by an actress of color.

ONE

In a puddle of light, Goulnora Dordona is interviewed by Ulugbek. A strikingly attractive woman of 40, she wears a gown by Ziad Nakad. Ulugbek's suit hangs on him. A videographer, female, about 30, films them. The videographer has red hair.

GOULNORA

Although I'm an Uzbek, "I think New Englandly," as Emily says. I went to school in Massachusetts. I've seen the leaves turn. I'm not the sort of Uzbek who goes to America and sees everything from an Uzbek point of view. So, no camel! The poems are universal. That's something I love in them: she only left the small town where she lived three or four times in her life, but her words have meaning half way around the world amongst our fields of cotton and facing our ancient Khast Imam Mosque, which you see outside these windows.

ULUGBEK

Your excellency, you've brought other scholars from around the world to finally solve the riddle of this person. They must have a very great respect for you.

GOULNORA

They know me from the article I published concerning Emily's imagery. You have to interpret the imagery. It doesn't work itself out. Emily is not so transparent as this glass.

ULUGBEK

And the conference... it's so organized!

GOULNORA

Well, I graduated from Harvard, you know. It's a good school for that. When you have 500 pages of reading in a week you have to be organized. You don't survive otherwise.

ULUGBEK

And you have PhD degree from University of Tashkent...

GLUNARA

That's not important.

ULUGBEK

In addition to a scholar you are a businesswoman and a diplomat. You have interests in publishing and communications...

GOULNORA

That's not important.

ULUGBEK

Helping your father in many ways...

GOULNORA

This is for Emily.

ULUGBEK

And you're a mother, as well...

GOULNORA

Yes, I am a mother. I never economize time on my children. We have an early dinner or a late lunch, but I am there with them.

ULUGBEK

You could have been anything you want; it's greatly impressive that you chose to be a scholar...

GOULNORA

I am very proud that our country hosts this conference, the first in Central Asia. I am proud to be a scholar among other scholars who have come a great distance to be here.

ULUGBEK

Would you tell our viewers your own interpretation of the poems? I'm certain they would be interested.

GOULNORA

Well, there are almost 1800 poems. I don't think I can tell you what all of them mean.

ULUGBEK

Do you have a favorite?

AN ANGRY VOICE (*off*)

Nima deganimni tushundingizmi ?

WILL (*off*)

I was told to come here.

THE ANGRY VOICE (*off*)

Kechki ovqatga taklif qilmoqchiman !

WILL (*off*)

I don't understand your language.

GOULNORA

Will you excuse me? One of our guests has arrived from the airport and I must attend to him.

ULUGBEK

Of course, your excellency!

(At a gesture from Ulugbek, the videographer turns off the light for the filming. In the relative darkness Will Darvis enters. At 29 he's cultivated a permanent boyishness. He wears expensive clothes in a disorderly way, as if they were jeans and a sweatshirt. A computer bag hangs from one shoulder. He expects to be misunderstood.)

WILL

Is this conference? Is *Perspectives from Amherst*?

GOULNORA

Mr. Darvis! We've been expecting you. I am Goulnora Dordona.

WILL

Oh. Will Darvis—but you already know that. We meet at last.

GOULNORA

We meet at last!

WILL

So many messages!

GOULNORA

Thank you for coming.

WILL

Thank you for inviting me.

GOULNORA *(to Ulugbek)*

Chairs.

ULUGBEK

At once, your excellency!

(Ulugbek and the videographer arrange chairs for Goulnora and Will.)

WILL

I'm not sure why you invited me. You know I'm not a specialist.

GOULNORA

I know. But I did my research: you're very successful at what you do. *(To Ulugbek)* Go.

ULUGBEK *(to the videographer)*

Come!

(Ulugbek and the videographer exit.)

GOULNORA

And you have an unusual project. The others will like it.

WILL

I'm not sure about that. You have some heavy hitters lined up...

GOULNORA

Haters?

WILL

"Hitters"—like in baseball. You have well-known people lined up—experts.

GOULNORA

"Heavy *hitters!*" Hmmm. I know this—I went to a Red Sox game: "The Green Monster!" "Reverse the curse!" Such a curious game—so American. Do you like sport, Will?

WILL

I don't follow baseball—but I think the curse has been reversed.

GOULNORA

Hmm. *Baise*-ball. In French it means something quite different.

WILL

Why do you say it's American? The Japanese play it, too.

GOULNORA

It's American because half the time you play as a team and half the time you play for yourself. The team wins or loses, but every player has *numbers* with his name. How to say it? *His value is known*. Shall I call someone to take your bag?

WILL

That's alright. I'll just put it here—if that's okay?

(Will sets his bag down.)

GOULNORA

I suppose it's your computer.

WILL

No, but there's something else that's valuable. The computer's at the hotel.

GOULNORA

So you had a chance to *freshen up*?

WILL

Not really. The driver took me to the hotel, but wouldn't let me get out. He dropped off the bag, then brought me here.

GOULNORA

He didn't explain?

WILL

I couldn't understand a word. He wasn't open to negotiation.

GOULNORA

I apologize for him. He didn't want you to miss the gala dinner.

WILL

There's a dinner?

GOULNORA

It's not too late—I'll have the chef prepare a plate for you.

WILL

Oh, you're very kind. I ate on the plane.

GOULNORA

You have very attractive eyes, Mr. Darvis. I'm sure people have told you that.

WILL

Please, call me "Will." No, actually. Well, my mother did.

GOULNORA

Uzbek eyes are hematite—not black but very brown—not hazel either, a mineral brown. They don't welcome light, they only reflect it. Your eyes are like opals. They tickle the light.

WILL

I see why you like poetry.

GOULNORA

It's poets I like. Poetry is a by-product.

WILL

I'm not a poet—not at all.

GOULNORA

You will be when I've finished with you. I will take good care of my *latecomer*!

WILL

So what have I missed?

GOULNORA

Just my little speech of welcome. And the keynote address by Judith Werff.

WILL

Judith Werff! I read her book—well, some of it. It's really good.

GOULNORA

You'll be able to tell her yourself in a moment. The biography panel is having a little get-together here.

(Voices come from the corridor—high-spirited banter from tipsy academics.)

JUDITH *(off)*

You're FULL OF SHIT! Get OUT of here!

GOULNORA

I hear them.

LYNN *(off)*

But she did! She was planning to publish!

WILL

Is that her?

JUDITH *(off)*

She DIDN'T! No WAY! No HOW! Don't shit me!

GULANARA

That is her.

(Lynn Jamisson enters. The recent publication of her dissertation has transformed her from a mousy post-doc to an academic osprey: quick, confident and—because her scholarship is the most recent—frighteningly well informed.)

LYNN

She wasn't owning up to authorship, of course. She would be editing the correspondence of *anonymous* lovers.

JUDITH

Hup! Light's up!

(Judith Werff snaps on the lights as she enters. They reveal a reception room of moderate size in a generic, upscale conference center. Werff is loud and brassy, a first-rate scholar having a good time a long way from home.)

LYNN

That's why she preserved the letters and diaries so carefully—she wanted the world to know, but *not to know*.

JUDITH

But *why*?

LYNN

Mabel thought she was living one of the great love affairs of history—Anthony and Cleopatra, Abelard and Heloise, Austin and Mabel.

JUDITH

But publishing the letters would be totally transparent!

LYNN

Suing Lavinia to get the maple tree was totally transparent! Everybody in the courtroom saw through it. Austin promised her the maple tree, but Lavinia reneged on the deal after he died.

JUDITH

But nobody said anything?

LYNN

Nobody *had* to say anything because they all knew—and Sue was still alive.

JUDITH

That Mabel! You love her or ya hate her!

ACKER (*off*)

Oh my heavens what a meal!

LYNN

Oh, she was a number alright, but if it weren't for Mabel, none of us would be here.

(John Acker enters. He's a middle-aged British academic with a wild mane of grey hair.)

ACKER (*a bit drunk*)

Three cheers for Mabel! Hip, hip, hurrah!

JUDITH

Shut up, John. (*to Lynn*) How do you figure?

LYNN

Sue would never have done what Mabel did. Lavinia *couldn't* do what Mabel did...

ACKER

Higginson could!

LYNN

But Higginson *refused!* He couldn't read her *handwriting!*

GOULNORA

I see the table conversation has been stimulating.

JUDITH

Goulнора! I'm so sorry—I didn't see you. We've been discussing...

ACKER

The meal! Thank you so much. It was fabulous! Quite overwhelming.

JUDITH

Superb!

ACKER

What a feast! Never seen the like at a conference—not even the Goncourt Academy!

GOULNORA

You're quite welcome.

WILL

I'm sorry I missed it.

JUDITH (*noticing Will*)

And what have we here?

GOULNORA

Oh, let me introduce... Judith Werff from Cornell, this is Will Darvis from...

WILL

Sunnyvale, California. Pleased to meet you. I read your book.

JUDITH

Oh!

ACKER

You and 40,000 other people! Judith is the undisputed best-seller of Dickinson biographers!

JUDITH (*modestly*)

Post-Sewall, at least.

WILL

I can see why. It's very complete and... very helpful.

GOULNORA

Professor John Acker from the University of Reading, Will Darvis.

ACKER

Delighted.

WILL

A Formal Feeling Comes, that John Acker?

ACKER

Indeed. None other.

WILL

Very pleased to meet you. (*to Goulnora*) You've got everybody here!

GOULNORA

And last, but not least, Dr. Lynn Jamisson, whose dissertation is now published by Harvard University Press. Will Darvis.

LYNN

Mr. Darvis, welcome!

WILL

Hi.

LYNN

I'm glad I'm not the only youngster here!

WILL

You aren't.

LYNN

I'm embarrassed; have you published something I should have read but didn't?

WILL

No, nothing at all. Don't worry.

LYNN

Oh, it's all right then.

(She knows this sounds foolish, but...)

ACKER

Well... it's good to have you here.

GOULNORA

So...

WILL *(to Lynn)*

Who's "Mabel"?

LYNN

Mabel Todd was the first editor of the poems...

ACKER

With Higginson.

LYNN

...one of very few people in the nineteenth century who could see how good they were. Hundreds exist today only because she transcribed them.

ACKER

Higginson couldn't read her handwriting.

LYNN

Mabel's husband taught Astronomy at Amherst College.

WILL

And there was a maple tree?

GOULNORA

I don't know this story.

LYNN

In 1898 she and David—that's the husband—sued Lavinia for a strip of land and a maple tree adjoining their house. They claimed that Austin had promised them the land as a reward for editing the poems.

WILL

Austin was Emily's brother, right?

ACKER

Quite right.

LYNN

But Austin's original gift of the house itself (and the land it stood on) came *before* Mabel started work on the poems.

WILL

Austin was her lover?

LYNN

For thirteen years.

WILL

But she was married...

LYNN

They were both married.

(During the above, a bartender wheels in a small bar.)

GOULNORA

At last! Would anyone like a *digestif*?

JUDITH

Wow! How d'ya like that, John? You'd never know we're in a Muslim country, would ya?

ACKER

I'm overwhelmed.

GOULNORA

Tashkent becomes each year more cosmopolitan. A Cognac? A have an eighteen-year-old Yamazaki...

ACKER

I really shouldn't—lovely wine with dinner. And that dessert was so rich! What do you call it?

GOULNORA

Hashima, it's a Central Asian specialty.

LYNN

Made from the fallopian tubes of frogs.

GOULNORA

Miss Jamisson has done her homework!

LYNN

It's a habit when you're disserting; you look everything up.

WILL

You must need a lot of frogs to make it.

GOULNORA

Our Uzbek marshes have no dearth of frogs.

LYNN

It's not actually the tubes but the fatty flesh *around* the tubes.

JUDITH (*to Goulнора*)

I read something else about fallopian tubes in your country: is it true what Human Rights Watch says about your father conducting forced sterilizations in the countryside?

ACKER

For God's sake, Judith!

JUDITH (*to Acker*)

Well I care about these women!

ACKER

You can't do anything about it!

JUDITH

Can't I?

GOULNORA

There is no truth whatever to this rumor. The President my father is making family planning clinics.

JUDITH

That's not what I heard.

GOULNORA

They tell many lies about us. Now that you are here you can see it's not true.

ACKER

Perhaps I'll have a liqueur after all. Will you accompany me, Professor Werff?

(Acker steers Judith to the bar, whispering urgently.)

LYNN

Maybe I'll go, too.

GOULNORA

Please, be my guest.

(Lynn follows them. Goulnora turns to Will.)

GOULNORA (CONT.)

So... Will.

WILL

Goulnora.

GOULNORA

Your first conference and see who's here! What do you think of my heavy haters?

(An intense argument is taking place in whispers at the bar.)

WILL

It's quite a lineup.

GOULNORA

A "line up" is people suspected of crime?

WILL

But also people playing a game.

GOULNORA

Ah. Again *le baiseball*.

WILL

This is my first Dickinson conference, but I go to game development conferences all the time.

GOULNORA

I know about those. You are part of my "line up" too. I hope you have your bat ready.

WILL

I'm not interested in scoring points. I just want to learn about Emily—to get a feeling for her.

GOULNORA

*My cocoon tightens, colors tease,
I'm feeling for the air;
A dim capacity for wings
Degrades the dress I wear.*

WILL

Hmmm. That's a very nice dress, actually. But I'm so banal—to talk about your dress...

GOULNORA

I'm used to having people remark what I wear. I'm often in public life.

WILL

It's very pretty.

GOULNORA

Wait till you see me with wings.

(The other scholars return from the bar, determined to be sociable.)

LYNN

Goulnora, did you know there's an asteroid named after Mabel?

GOULNORA

No, I didn't.

ACKER

I hope its orbit is eccentric.

JUDITH

Ha! That's a good one! Eccentric!

WILL

Was it a gift from David? The asteroid?

LYNN

No. Another astronomer named it. He named one nearby for David. Mabella is 510; Davida is 511.

WILL

So they're together.

ACKER

Wandering through space...

GOULNORA

The asteroid is feminized.

WILL

Did David know about Mabel's lover?

LYNN

David knew and David *watched*. He and Austin were best friends. They may have done foursomes with Mabel and one of David's lady friends.

GOULNORA

Foursomes? Like in tennis?

ACKER

The love game!

JUDITH

It probably looked more like wrestling.

(Laughter.)

GOULNORA

In our country adultery is not a joke. It is punished. Must it not be?

ACKER

I don't think anyone's contemplating adultery here.

JUDITH

Speak for yourself, John.

LYNN *(to Will)*

The Austin-Mabel affair is important because it's affected Dickinson publication to the present day. When Emily died Lavinia found the poems under the bed...

WILL

Lavinia is the sister?

LYNN

That's right. And she gave them to Sue to publish.

JUDITH

Sue being Emily's dearest friend.

ACKER

... and sister-in-law.

GOULNORA

Yes...

LYNN

But then she gave other poems to *Mabel*.

WILL

Oh my gosh.

LYNN

So there was competition—a feud, really—between Austin's wife and Austin's mistress.

ACKER

The ice queen and the piece of ass-troid.

JUDITH

That's not fair to Sue!

LYNN

It's not fair to Mabel, either.

JUDITH

Who cares about Mabel? She did everything she could to supplant Sue: she took Sue's husband, she took Sue's land to build a house on and then she took Emily's poems.

LYNN

To publish!

GOULNORA

And what fate befell her?

LYNN

Celebrity!

ACKER

Well-deserved, if you ask me.

JUDITH

Nobody asked you.

LYNN

She became quite famous in later life, lecturing to Women's Clubs about Emily and showing slides of the trips she and David took to far-off places so David could photograph eclipses. But she never got the land with the maple tree—and she never got the credit she deserves as Emily's first editor.

ACKER

With Higginson.

JUDITH

She was a pushy, lascivious, calculating slut.

LYNN

...who founded the industry that employs every one of us!

WILL

Maybe not me.

GOULNORA

But didn't she change Emily's poems for publication? The first volumes were corrupt, were they not?

LYNN

Yes, but they were *intelligent* changes. Victorian readers weren't ready for Emily. They needed regular rhymes and rhythms. They needed poems with titles...

ACKER

Most of the titles were Higginson's...

JUDITH

She was a slippery, ego-driven sex-pot!

LYNN (*over this*)

They needed recognizable sentiments, attitudes they could subscribe to.

ACKER

Just like us. We *beg* for sentiments we can subscribe to.

LYNN

Exactly! Mabel and Higginson have been pilloried for taking liberties with the poems, but the alternative was to tear a great gash in the mental fabric of the time. You start with a pinhole, then enlarge it. Mabel and Higginson prepared the poems for the reader, but they also prepared readers for the poems, gave them an appetite, prepared their palate.

GOULNORA

This image I understand very well—a *pinhole*. But the poems in the book were not as the poet intended.

ACKER

What does it matter what the poet intended?

GOULNORA

It's sacred, what the poet intended!

ACKER (*falling into lecture mode*)

This is what we believe when we *edit* poems: we compare drafts, consider variants, squint at the handwriting—*what does the poet intend?* But when we *talk* about poems it's just the opposite; we don't give a flying fuck what the poet intended. To argue from intent is bad criticism. No, we focus on the printed page to the point of denying the poet ever had intent!

JUDITH

Which, in Emily's case, she hadn't.

GOULNORA

On the *printed* page.

LYNN

May not have had.

ACKER

... so this *divorce* between critical and editorial practices turns us arse-backward half the time—as even the thickest of your college English Majors probably senses.

WILL

I wasn't an English major.

ACKER

Doesn't matter—you're forgiven. In our profession, then—the Emily profession—we agree that intentionality doesn't limit the poet—so why should it limit the *editor*? Isn't the editor's work subject to hesitation, to doubt, to the horror of sudden vacuum just like the poet's? The standard edition is full of instances where Chief Editor Franklin breaks his back to honor the poet's intention to the detriment of the poem itself. It's so fucking obvious!

GOULNORA

But if he didn't, it wouldn't be Dickinson; it would be Dickinson-Franklin.

LYNN

Or Dickinson-*Todd*-Franklin...

ACKER

Dickinson-Todd- *Higginson*-Franklin...

JUDITH

Get over it, John!

ACKER

Well that's the point I'm making: that thing that four different people left their gummy fingerprints on, that particular arrangement of words and empty spaces, that's *a poem*!

GOULNORA

But whose?

ACKER

Yours! And ours! Emily left them unfinished; when an editor finishes them—as *he must* if he's to print them at all—he becomes the poet's collaborator. When the reader finally gobbles them down, he too becomes a collaborator.

JUDITH

Always male, the collaborators...

GOULNORA (*to Acker*)

Is it that serious?

ACKER

Franklin three-six-nine: *Those Fair Fictitious people* —

LYNN

*Those Fair Fictitious people --
The women plucked away --...*

ACKER

Yes, that one. The text is a dog's dinner: Emily suggests twenty-six variants that fit eleven different places in the poem. There are literally *thousands* of possible combinations. There's no way an editor can present the totality of that poem.

WILL

You could with software—nothing to it. Click to cycle. Click to change. Click to revert. Pick your favorite combination.

LYNN

PhotoShop for literature?

WILL

Yeah, like PhotoShop.

GOULNORA

That's very interesting.

LYNN

I think so too.

(Goulнора looks daggers at Lynn.)

WILL

If Emily were alive today, I think she'd be into computers big time.

ACKER

If Emily were alive today, she'd be institutionalized—pumped so full of anti-psychotic meds she couldn't hold a pencil.

JUDITH

Behave yourself.

WILL

The way I see it, she wouldn't get out a lot, but she'd spend a ton of time online—and she'd have a really great blog.

ACKER

She'd call it "Lines online?"

LYNN

"That Thing with Feathers"

GOULNORA

No! "Perspectives from Amherst"!

(Smiles. They toast her: "Very good." "Bravo!")

ACKER

Young man, just what is... your project? You know, what's your claim to fame?

WILL

I don't know if it's a claim to fame, exactly.

GOULNORA

Will is *informaticien*... how do you say it? A computer guy!

WILL

I make interactive games.

JUDITH

Son of a bitch!

LYNN

Well, that's a change!

WILL

Last year the gaming industry gave itself a challenge to make an Emily Dickinson game. Like, what's the thing that's least like *Grand Theft Auto*? We figured it was Emily Dickinson. It was just a cute idea at first, an off-the-wall thing, but as I read up on her I wanted to take it seriously.

ACKER

Make a serious game?

WILL

Not a game, really—more like a nosey neighbor. There'd be an Emily app for your phone, but she'd also be resident on your laptop or tablet. Whatever you're doing, like it's Facebook or

whatever, Emily pops up and says stuff that's poetic. Or else she asks you hard questions. She puts everything in a larger context.

GOULNORA

You see—this is why I invited him!

JUDITH

So you'd use Emily to make machines more lovable?

WILL

That's one way to look at it.

JUDITH

The reason we make machines loveable—the reason we imbue them with human characteristics—is to cover the scent of the actual humans who make them, toiling impossible hours under obscene conditions. We anthropomorphize the machine to wipe out the brutal fact of its construction, especially Macs.

GOULNORA

There are no such Macs in Uzbekistan.

JUDITH

Yet.

WILL

Anyway, as you interact with her, it starts as a cordial relationship, but she either becomes romantically obsessed with you or goes into a suicidal depression and deletes herself from your device.

ACKER

Very obliging of her...

WILL

And if she really goes for something you write or post, Emily "likes" it automatically and maybe sends you a friend request.

ACKER

Quite unlike the Emily we know. "*The Soul selects her own Society...*"

LYNN AND JUDITH

... Then shuts the door."

WILL

I remember that one.

ACKER (*after two liqueurs*)

Oh, good! You actually read some poems!

LYNN

Be nice to Will. He's ventured into the Lion's den...

JUDITH (*also a bit drunk*)

Grrrrrr! We're beasts! We're horrible!

WILL

I'm not a specialist like you guys. I don't know anything about editing poems, but I'm interested in her personality.

LYNN

Bless you, dear!

GOULNORA

All of us are interested. It's for this reason that we're the biography panel.

JUDITH

And you think people will pay to have Emily in their computer?

WILL

I don't know. They might.

ACKER

I doubt it very much.

WILL

You may be right...

ACKER

For dilettantes, Emily is a brilliant-but-corrosive nuisance. She cuts through them like a scythe—she knocks them clean aside!

WILL

I hope you're wrong. My company hopes they'll do better than my last game.

LYNN

How well did your last game do?

WILL

Seventy-five million copies.

(Pause)

JUDITH
Did you say *million*?

WILL
World-wide, yeah.

LYNN
I can't think that high.

JUDITH
Ya see, John, this is the man who keeps our students from graduating!

WILL
I mean, it's *software*. People want it.

ACKER
"After us, the savage god..."

GOULNORA (*to Will*)
My father wants to create an Uzbek version of social media. You will enjoy talking to him.

JUDITH
I hear your father has his enemies crucified.

GOULNORA (*blandly*)
I've heard those stories, too.

ACKER
Judith, we're here to talk about literature!

JUDITH
I don't care!

GOULNORA
There's no truth to these rumors, in every case.

(*She means "in any case."*)

WILL
One thing I can't figure out is why she wore white all the time and never left the house.

LYNN (*"here we go!"*)
You're not the only one.

ACKER

Oh, no.

LYNN

There are several theories. Would you like to hear them?

WILL

Shoot.

LYNN

Mattie Dickinson said her aunt was agoraphobic. Pollak says Emily's father wouldn't let her go out. Two people say it was religion, Patterson says guilt, Heather Thomas says anorexia...

ACKER

And there's the Swedish bloke who says she was secretly married and had an abortion!

GOULNORA

The Swedish bloke I *did not* invite.

JUDITH

And John, here, has a ridiculous theory of his own...

WILL (*to Lynn*)

What do *you* think?

LYNN

Take your pick,

GOULNORA

I think it was love!

WILL

Love?

GOULNORA

When your heart is broken, you don't want to see anybody. When my divorce happened I stopped all public appearances. My husband took our children to Long Island. I had to sue in American court to get them back. It was terrible period.

JUDITH (*flat*)

You poor thing.

GOULNORA

I wrote my article on Emily's imagery during this time. The white dress represents the perpetual virginity she vowed for herself.

WILL

You say her heart was broken?

GOULNORA

Isn't it obvious?

WILL

But who was the man?

GOULNORA

Does it matter? There are several possibilities.

LYNN (*the usual suspects*)

The Rev. Charles Wadsworth, Samuel Bowles...

GOULNORA

When love is impossible the world disgusts us. We don't want to go out.

ACKER

Who even knows what love is?

JUDITH

Everybody knows what love is, John—even you.

GOULNORA

We should hope so!

JUDITH

The love of John's life, of course, is Higginson.

ACKER

That's because Thomas Wentworth Higginson was a rational being, unlike Judith, here. Higginson had friends. Higginson, you could count on!

LYNN

Guys! Don't start—we're talking about Emily.

GOULNORA

And love!

ACKER

Quite right. Emily and love: far be it from me to contradict our esteemed and generous host, but Emily was enjoying herself famously at Sue and Austin's house as late as 1858. She was the life of the party, so to speak, five years *after* meeting Charles Wadsworth and supposedly falling tragically in love with him.

LYNN

Samuel Bowles is the better candidate anyhow.

JUDITH

According to *Sewall*.

ACKER

Samuel Bowles, who had to cajole her to come downstairs and be sociable? If you're hiding because you love somebody, do you hide from that same somebody?

GOULNORA

Such behavior is unstrange to me.

LYNN

That leaves George Henry Gould—according to Habegger.

JUDITH

DON'T GIVE ME HABEGGER! I DON'T WANT TO HEAR HABEGGER!

ACKER

Touchy! Touchy!

LYNN

You could concede the main point, John: if Emily's certain somebody is married and she can't have him, she might seclude herself. Isn't that possible?

ACKER

If you accept that mentality, you accept the whole myth of "our Emily," the ethereal presence in white, flitting from room to room with a pencil in one hand and a lily in the other, always ready with a Hallmark Cardism or some fucking *hymn to nature*. You accept the Emily who's kind to children because she's nursing a broken heart. You accept the tiny writing desk with a single sheet of paper on it, you cut her clean off from the intellectual currents of her time. And I shouldn't have to tell you Yanks that those currents run *deep*. If that's the Emily you're putting in your game, you can keep her. That sentimental, swooning, elfin bitch is exactly what we have to overcome!

WILL

I want a real person.

GOULNORA

So do I.

WILL

What's your explanation, Lynn? Can I call you Lynn?

LYNN

Of course. I say she stayed home to work. She may have played down her art in letters to Higginson, but she knew how good she was. She measured the task and calculated the cost: if it meant cutting herself off from fools and village gossips, so be it. She couldn't work and also be somebody's wife or somebody's mother. She couldn't go gallivanting around like a tourist. The undiscovered country was within. She needed solitude, a clean room and, yes, a small table to write on.

ACKER

Emerson worked his ass off but never made a monk of himself!

LYNN

Emerson was a wimp compared to Emily.

WILL

Really?

GOULNORA

Emerson was the heavy hater of his time.

LYNN

But he didn't have Emily's power. He didn't make people afraid.

GOULNORA

Afraid of Emily?

ACKER

Bosh.

LYNN

They were all afraid of Emily, even Austin. That's why he couldn't deed the cottage to Mabel while Emily was alive. And that's the other reason Emily stayed indoors: she wanted to protect the town from the acid in her pen and the lightening in her mind.

WILL

But why did she wear white?

LYNN

White was her habit—in both senses of the word.

A woman—white—to be—

And wear—if God should count me fit—

Her blameless mystery—

ACKER

White was the color of hygiene. Medical authorities recommended extreme cleanliness for epileptics.

LYNN

Bosh!

WILL

You think she was epileptic?

ACKER

I *know* she was. Her nephew and great aunt were epileptic; it was rife in the family.

LYNN

Then why didn't Austin record her fits in his journal the way he did his son's?

ACKER

Shame.

JUDITH

Austin had no shame.

ACKER

Of course he had shame: he's the town squire, the son of a congressman—and his sister's a nut case!

JUDITH

John!

ACKER

She was bonkers! She was out of her mind!

JUDITH

That's so typical and so patronizing...

ACKER

Look at the bleeding facts, woman! Higginson said she was probably half cracked and he got it right. It's not just Sue and Austin's toney guests she couldn't stand to see: when a tradesman came selling a watering can she desperately wanted she wouldn't *open the door!* She sent Lavinia running after him to buy it.

JUDITH

That doesn't mean she was sick, just flighty...

LYNN

She was NOT FLIGHTY!

ACKER

Once she ruined some preserves she was making because someone *knocked at the door!*

WILL

Look...

ACKER

She knew she was sick and hated it. Sue knew she was sick and pitied her. You want chapter and verse?

GOULNORA

People who are mentally ill don't write glorious poetry!

ACKER

That's *exactly* what mentally ill people do. Talent and sanity don't even dance in the same ballroom.

WILL

Yeah, there are some pretty crazy programmers out there.

ACKER

Some of the poems we most admire describe epileptic fits: "Ecstasy" was her word for it. "*Take everything, but leave me ecstasy.*"

GOULNORA

Surely that does not explain...

ACKER

Franklin nine-three-seven:

*I felt a Cleaving in my Mind ---
As if my Brain had split ---
I tried to match it --- Seam by Seam ---
But could not make them fit ---*

JUDITH (*overlapping*)

This is a travesty!

ACKER

*The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before...*

JUDITH

Stop it. Stop it this instant!

ACKER (*over her*)

*But Sequence raveled out of Sound ---
Like Balls --- upon a Floor ---*

JUDITH

You have no right... no right to *medicalize*! To talk symptoms! She transcribed the human soul—you write *footnotes*.

ACKER

Footnotes have soul.

JUDITH

You're nothing but a technician. Your mind is an autoclave. You don't *read* poetry, you *sterilize* it!

ACKER

Demon woman! Harpy! Succubus!

WILL

Whoa! I'm sorry I asked!

GOULNORA

Sweet, please! Everyone be sweet!

LYNN (*a mock-invocation*)

*Oh some Scholar!
Oh some Wise Man from the skies!*

WILL (*back to safer ground*)

Professor Werff, why don't you tell us *your* theory?

JUDITH (*cheery again*)

"Judy," please!

WILL

Judy...

JUDITH

Like Judy Garland. *Come on, get happy!
Shake all your cares away.
Come on, get happy!
Get ready for the judgement day!*

What's your theory?
WILL

I'm sorry... about what?
JUDITH

About Emily being a recluse.
WILL

Oh. My theory, if you want to call it that, is exactly the same as our host's.
JUDITH

You agree with me?
GOULNORA

This is new!
ACKER

I think it was love. She stayed home to be near the love of her life, the only person she was truly intimate with, her neighbor, her best critic and collaborator. She stayed home to be with Sue.
JUDITH

She loved another woman?
GOULNORA

She loved Sue.
JUDITH

With forbidden love?
GOULNORA

You expect this to shock us? It doesn't shock us. Nor is it new.
ACKER

Nevertheless...
JUDITH

Goes back to Sewall at least...
ACKER

Lynn?
JUDITH (*asking the umpire*)

LYNN

Ummm... Sewall cites the post-mortem mutilation of the poems mentioning Sue as evidence that Emily's entourage thought the affection was improper.

ACKER (*playing the comic to Lynn's straight man*)

Ya don't say?

LYNN

That's what Sewall says.

JUDITH

Well for once he got it right—and Sewall is in Mabel's camp.

LYNN

NOT ALWAYS!

ACKER (*singing*)

She loved Sue, yeah, yeah, yeah!

She loved Sue, yeah, yeah, yeah!

WILL

Love those early Beatles!

ACKER

It's obvious she loved her sister-in-law. It's nothing new.

JUDITH

Well I say she loved her carnally. That's new.

LYNN

Prove it!

JUDITH

It's in the letters: "*...every bud that blooms, does but remind me more of that garden unseen, awaiting the hand that tills it...*"

WILL

Whoa!

JUDITH

"Dear Susie, when you come, how many boundless blossoms among the silent beds!"

WILL

That sounds pretty vaginal...

JUDITH

Damn right it does.

LYNN

But does it make her a lesbian? I mean isn't it a mistake to apply Freud to conventional expressions of affection between nineteenth-century women?

ACKER

Emily was *never* conventional.

GOULNORA

In every case, homosexuals are not a problem in Uzbekistan.

JUDITH

Are you saying they don't *exist*?

GOULNORA

I say they are not a problem.

(During the above, the bartender gets a text message. He now brings it to Goulнора.)

BARTENDER

Your excellency. Is message.

(Goulнора reads.)

GOULNORA

Yes. Is message. Please excuse me.

LYNN

What is it?

GOULNORA

Some of the guests have trouble digesting the hashima. *(to Bartender) Benimle gelin.*

(Goulнора and the bartender exit.)

JUDITH

I'm going to freshen this up. Wanna come?

ACKER

Good idea.

(Judith and Acker move to the now-untended bar to refill their glasses.)

LYNN (*to Will*)

Don't mind them. It's a courtship disorder. They've been trying to get into each other's pants ever since they co-founded the *Journal of Dickinson Studies*.

WILL

You're kidding.

LYNN

I wish I were. Conference after conference we get this *foreplay*—rough and verbal, but nothing comes of it.

WILL

So is it still foreplay?

LYNN

It's pathetic. It doesn't help that they've spent their lives studying a poet who extracts extreme emotions from ambiguous relationships—but it's not an accident either.

WILL

Can I show you something?

LYNN (*smiling*)

Depends what.

WILL

It's most of what I've been working on. Look.

(*Will unzips his bag and pulls out long trays full of cards.*)

LYNN

Baseball cards?

WILL

Messages. Like Tweets, only better—the best tweets ever written. Like this one: *I believe the love of God may be taught not to seem like bears*.

LYNN (*savoring*)

Hmmm.

WILL

Or this one: *the tie that binds us is fine, but a hair never dissolves*.

LYNN

About Sue...

WILL

Or here: *the thief's compassion for integrity is his divinest grief.*

LYNN

That one's harder...

WILL

And some of them rhyme:

*I never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone —*

LYNN

It's about a snake...

WILL

It doesn't matter what it's about—isn't it amazing? "Zero at the Bone"—it makes a new connection in your brain—a new pathway between neurons. I felt it happening as I wrote.

LYNN

You copied them by hand?

WILL

Yeah.

LYNN

But you've got hundreds of them!

WILL

I had an old-fashioned teacher in high school. She taught us reading notes on 3x5 cards. It stuck with me—something about the feel of the pen in your fingers...

LYNN

*I can't tell you—but you feel it --
Nor can you tell me—*

.... Oh, I can't remember!

WILL

It's in here... "Saints with slate and pencil...?"

LYNN

*Saints, with ravished slate and pencil
Solve our April Day!*

WILL

Yeah! Isn't that great? Like there's a day in April when everything's perfect, but it's only perfect because there are saints solving equations in the background—'cause *you need* equations—and the saints have slates on their knees and the slates are all worn out from of all the equations... I mean, it's crazy, it's completely unreal, but it's also just right!

LYNN

Do you like to smoke?

WILL

You mean weed?

LYNN

I've got hash.

WILL

I haven't done it since college.

LYNN

Come to my room tonight. I've got a terrific view of the mosque.

WILL

What's your room number?

LYNN

You expect me to remember?

WILL

You can remember whole books!

LYNN

Books are different. (*She rummages in her purse.*) Hang on a second; it's on the little folder thingy...

WILL

Maybe this is a bad idea. Goulnora won't like it.

LYNN

What's she gonna do, crucify you?

WILL

She might.

(*The Bartender re-enters, livid.*)

BARTENDER

Your Emily be puke! You all be puke! You say we don't know, but you say "*poems universal, speak to people everywhere.*" Puke you! Do you know single thing about Uzbekistan? Do you read Bobur, Ibn Sino, Navoi—or world conqueror, King Temur?

ACKER

Quite right, old chap. You tell 'em!

BARTENDER

You, British, are horriblest man I meet in my life and internet. You know nothing! You say Uzbek don't love poetry because no free press!

ACKER

Do I say that?

BARTENDER

Free press is to wipe ass with! You provoke Goulнора and then expect her to bless you?

JUDITH (*overlapping*)

Did we provoke her?

BARTENDER

Goulнора is worth more than you! Emily is slut, but Goulнора is pure! Goulнора is publish!

LYNN

She's in my bibliography.

BARTENDER

Your bibliography is cunt! Don't be proud to Goulнора, BECAUSE GOULNORA KNOWS!

(*Goulнора returns in a controlled fury.*)

GOULNORA

Anlamı Nedir bu öfke? [What is this I hear?]

BARTENDER

Sayın, I am savunan bizim onur! [They insult our country, Excellency!]

GOULNORA

Bana Size sözünü tutmak size saldırı konuklarım! [You were warned not to speak to the guests.]

BARTENDER (*terrified*)

Merhamet ile kötü bir akılsız bir aile. Sayın! [I'm sorry. I've failed you, excellency.]

GOULNORA

Hemen bırakın ve bekleyin siparişlerim. [You have failed your country, vermin!]

BARTENTER

MERHAMET EDIN! MERHAMET EDIN! [I'm sorry! I'm sorry!]

GOULNORA

Go!

(The bartender exits, trembling. A short silence.)

ACKER

Nice chap. First Uzbek I've had a real conversation with.

LYNN

I thought his outrage was over-determined.

ACKER

I disagree.

GOULNORA

Many of my people have little contact with Westerners. Please excuse him.

JUDITH

No harm done.

WILL

I don't know what upset him, but I'm sure he had his reasons.

GOULNORA

A professor from Princeton threw up on a Persian carpet. An antique, I'm afraid—the carpet, not the professor—although the professor is not young.

(The videographer from earlier has reentered with a still camera to photograph Goulnora with her guests. They watch her fiddle with her equipment. She looks up.)

PHOTOGRAPHER

Bonsoir.

ACKER

Well I could use another drink. Will you join me, young man?

WILL

Maybe a diet Coke. Lynn?

LYNN

No thanks, nothing for me.

(Will and John move to the bar. Lynn dumps the contents of her purse on the floor and squats beside it. The photographer takes a picture.)

GOULNORA

So it's just us girls.

(During the following, Lynn finds her room number, a pen and a copy of the banquet menu. She writes the number on the menu, then reassembles her purse.)

JUDITH

What are you going to do to him?

GOULNORA

To whom?

JUDITH

The bartender.

GOULNORA

What do you think?

JUDITH

I don't know. I'm concerned for him.

GOULNORA

You have funny ideas, Judy. Why should I do *anything* to him? That's not what power means. Power means you can let things take care of themselves. He's an ignorant man and ignorance is its own punishment, don't you agree?

JUDITH

Ignorance is not something I know much about.

GOULNORA

And *I* do?

JUDITH

I didn't say that.

GOULNORA

What do you know about punishment?

JUDITH

Not much.

GOULNORA

You are full professor with not much punishment—how is this possible?

JUDITH

I don't punish my students, if that's what you're implying.

GOULNORA

You never give a C minus?

JUDITH

That's not punishment, that's what they deserve!

GOULNORA (*an edge of nasty*)

Ha!

ACKER (*returning with Will*)

For my part, I'm convinced that poetry isn't a slave to gender, race or sexual orientation. To think otherwise is to dethrone the imagination. Poetry becomes nothing more than a transcription of the poet's demographics. I encountered the same problem on a panel about Langston Hughes; they went on and on about black poetry this and black poetry that until I finally said "For God's sake, don't you people see that *all* poetry is *black* poetry—that's why we print it on white paper!"

WILL (*only mildly amused*)

That's funny, John.

GOULNORA

So... we're making friends.

WILL

This guy can be really funny.

JUDITH

He can be really wrong, too.

ACKER

Judith and I agree about many things, but we've managed to move beyond them.

LYNN (*low, to Will*)

Fifteen forty-One.

WILL

I don't know the Franklin numbers.

LYNN

That's my room number.

JUDITH (*to photographer*)

No photo! No photo!

PHOTOGRAPHER

Je m'excuse...

JUDITH (*to Goulnora*)

Must we be photographed to satisfy your vanity? Must we make mash for your father's propaganda?

ACKER

Shut up, Judith. You don't object to being photographed for *Dickinson Studies* in front of the Houghton Library.

JUDITH

Don't you see this is different?

GOULNORA

How is it different?

JUDITH

You're trying to show the world that your god-forsaken country loves poetry!

GOULNORA

And that's not permitted?

JUDITH (*to Acker*)

At the Houghton it's just about us. It's about us and our proceedings.

GOULNORA

This god-forsaken country has proceedings too—and the right to document them.

(She gestures to the photographer to resume her work.)

JUDITH

I don't want the whole world to see me drinking your Scotch.

GOULNORA

Then don't drink it.

ACKER

She's got you there!

(Judith throws her drink at Acker.)

JUDITH

If you can't back me up, stay out of it! (Pardon the theatrical cliché.)

ACKER

I can back you up, of course, but not for your reasons.

WILL *(theory is safer)*

Let's hear it, John!

ACKER *(RE: the photographer)*

This lovely young woman, whom I celebrate as an example of nature's excelling handiwork, has come among us with her beeping beetle of a camera to destroy nature itself: she causes us to imitate ourselves. She saps authenticity from the proceedings of the globe.

LYNN

John...

ACKER *(lecturing now)*

We live in an age that prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality. This silken creature abets the destruction of direct experience. She mediates life and so divorces us from nature.

JUDITH

Divorce! At last something you know about!

ACKER *(ignoring this)*

As we consume images of ourselves we immolate our own originality. She takes my picture; I see my picture and instantly want another—because I need to bolster the reality which I rightly sense the first photograph depleted. But the second photograph depletes it further. Photography devours itself and the native fecundity of the earth...

JUDITH

Totally paranoid...

GOULNORA *(amused)*

*As Lightning on a Landscape
Exhibits Sheets of Place —
Not yet suspected —
but for Flash —*

LYNN
And Click—

ACKER
and Suddenness. Franklin, nine-seven-four.

LYNN
 So fucking beautiful!

ACKER
 So it never ends. The more we attempt to fix the moment, the more we underscore its transience.

WILL
 What's the answer?

ACKER (*taking the photographer's wrist*)
 Don't seize the moment—seize the photographer! Take her—take her in her finest moment! I lead her to a day bed and squirt my emulsion onto nature's plate!

PHOTOGRAPHER
Qu'est-ce qu'il dit, le monsieur?

LYNN
 You're mad!

PHOTOGRAPHER
Il est fou?

JUDITH
 He's not mad. He fears death.

PHOTOGRAPHER
Lâchez moi, s'il vous plait.

WILL
 Let her go, John.

ACKER
 Not until she restores the essence of the earth.

WILL
 I said, let her go!

GOULNORA (*releasing the photographer*)

Emily would understand—as *he* understands. Even a year from now, her photographs will cry his progress toward the grave—toward Immortality, as Emily would say.

JUDITH

John got no Immortality—John got flaccid prick.

ACKER (*to Judith*)

Hush your fathomless twaddle!

JUDITH

Potty mouth!

ACKER

When Judith talks about Emily it's like somebody talking about her oh-so-talented niece who aced her A levels and won all the prizes but still doesn't have a boyfriend!

JUDITH

When John talks about Emily it's like the bleating of a castrated ram cornered in the crumbling battlements of male privilege. He can't seem to accept that the entitlements that Austin took for granted as a firstborn male don't apply to him.

ACKER

Bitch! Poetry Book Club alternate!

JUDITH

PATRIARCH!

ACKER

Vermin! Why do you wear such ugly spectacles?

JUDITH

PRICK!

(She shoves him. The photographer gets a shot of Acker falling backwards.)

GOULNORA

Please, now! Let's be friends!

ACKER

I seem to be on the floor.

LYNN

Judy, are you alright?

JUDITH

I'm alright.

ACKER

I'm the one on the floor.

WILL (*helping Acker up*)

You guys get really passionate about this stuff.

GOULNORA

No violence. Please! Have some Courvoisier.

JUDITH

I think it's a scream that a Central Asian barbarian tells us to swear off violence!

GOULNORA

The violence here comes from Boston barbarians.

LYNN

Cornell is in New York State...

GOULNORA

I say "Boston" for alliteration.

JUDITH

We're grateful for your hospitality, but don't ask us to forget that you send children out to the cotton fields without water and your father boils dissidents alive.

GOULNORA

You don't understand us. We are the descendants of Tamerlane the Great. Life is hard here; political life is cruel. Emily's poems are also cruel. That's why they speak to us. Here in Tashkent, professor, you finally attain at the center of the Dickinson Empire! Massachusetts is our colony; you've struggled all your career to learn cruelty from us! Franklin three-seven-two...

ACKER

NO! Not three-seven-two! KEEP YOUR BLOODY HANDS OFF THREE-SEVEN-TWO!

GOULNORA

*After Great Pain a formal feeling comes --
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs --...*

ACKER

ARRRRRRRAH!

(Acker throws himself into a corner and covers his ears.)

JUDITH

For God sake, it's *poetry*...

GOULNORA

Why is it always *poetry, poetry*?

JUDITH

It's not meant to be taken literally.

GOULNORA

How you know how it's *meant be taken*?

JUDITH

Because I'm a real scholar and English is my native language, that's how.

GOULNORA

But what do you know about Great Pain? Have you ever seen a man tortured to death?

JUDITH

Have you?

GOULNORA

My father has prepared me in case a plot against his life succeeds. My first task is to restore order.

JUDITH

I don't see what this has to do with Emily.

GOULNORA

Wait one moment and I'll show you what this has to do with Emily!

(Goulnora dons reading glasses and pulls a typescript from her Louis Vuitton bag.)

GOULNORA (CONT.)

My Western colleagues frequently assume a degree of metaphor in Emily's imagery which is quite at odds with what Emily knew about the world. In many ways, the average citizen of Uzbekistan lives closer to Emily's New England than do certain academics who see poetic fantasy where Emily recounts simple facts of everyday life.

LYNN

This is the paper you're giving tomorrow, isn't it?

GOULNORA (*a command*)

Sit down. Consider Franklin, three-nine-six:

*There is a Languor of the Life
More imminent than Pain-
Tis Pain's Successor-When the Soul
Has suffered all it can -*

Ruth Miller claims that Emily was prostrated by Thomas Higginson's critique of her poems like a patient after a surgical operation. But what if the poem describes an actual operation—without anesthetic?

WILL

Is it still poetry?

GOULNORA

My American and British colleagues think poetry only concerns imagined events and supposed emotions. But what if Emily simply describes pain? Pain so excruciating that people in developed countries rarely feel its like? Franklin, two-eight-six:

*... like a Face of Steel --
That suddenly looks into ours
With a metallic grin --
The Cordiality of Death --
Who drills his Welcome in --*

Isn't it possible that the speaker is describing an actual death? A *delivered* death that *drills its welcome in*? As an Uzbek, I recognize sensations here where Western critics see only metaphor. And these famous lines:

*I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true —*

ACKER (*somewhat recovered*)

For God's sake, woman, she's describing torments *of the mind!*

GOULNORA

*The Eyes glaze once—and that is Death—
Impossible to feign...*

Be honest, John, does that sound like torments *of the mind?*

WILL

Jesus!

GOULNORA

That's exactly what it's like, I assure you. Her description is *realistic*, almost clinical. The details could only come from observation. And what happened to Denis Cashman, the Irish servant who disappears from the Dickinson household AND the historical record in 1861?

LYNN

Enlisted in the Union army?

GOULNORA

There's no record of it. My people looked.
*And you were frozen led
 From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt
 To Gibbets, and the Dead --*

ACKER

This is obscene! You must not say this!

GOULNORA

Emily tortured Denis Cashman to death in the basement of the Homestead!

ACKER

Prove it!

GOULNORA

The evidence is there. Open your eyes!

ACKER

This is madness!

GOULNORA

“Bonkers” you said earlier! Perhaps *homicidal* bonkers? Perhaps the “formal feeling” is Emily’s acknowledgement of what she’s done? Of course, her family keeps her indoors after that...

ACKER

I must put a stop to this!

(Acker looks around for a weapon. He finds Will's card files.)

WILL

No, not that!

(Acker rushes at Goulнора who climbs onto a buffet table.)

ACKER

Barbarian! Murderer!

GOULNORA

Kapaklar! Kapaklar! [Guards!]

(Acker swings the card files, but Will blocks his thrust. Cards go flying.)

WILL

Please stop!

LYNN

Put those down this instant!

(Lynn tackles Acker.)

ACKER

Let me go! Let me do this!

LYNN

Put them down!

JUDITH

Let him go, you puling, post-feminist whelp!

(Judith attacks Lynn. The bartender re-enters, bare-chested and brandishing a scimitar.)

BARTENDAR

KAPAKLAR!

PHOTOGRAPHER

Chouette!

(She takes pictures as quickly as she can. The scholars form a writhing heap. Goulнора throws the cards into the air. The bartender slashes at them as they flutter to the ground.)

GOULNORA

Bu barbar kazanın, professor! The barbarians win!

(Lights fade.)

TWO

A large maple tree, resplendent in fall foliage, has grown through the conference room. The walls are partly gone and florescent lights have given way to moonlight. The functional hotel furniture hasn't changed, but now somehow suggests Massachusetts in the nineteenth century. The actor who played the photographer in act one appears. She's dressed in white, her red hair plaited in a bun.

EMILY

Mr. Higginson... Mr. Higginson!

Higginson enters in tweeds. Is there something of Acker about him or is it just the effect of doubling? He appears settled into later life, but certain questions shake him still. He doesn't hear or see Emily.

HIGGINSON

So this is the famous maple tree! Silly thing to stop a flow of poems to the public. Perhaps I should have continued as co-editor, but it was taking too much time! The century coming to an end and everybody reading Emily Dickinson—eleven thousand copies of an unknown poet—and a dead one to boot!

EMILY

Mr. Higginson...

HIGGINSON (*out front*)

On April 16, 1862, I took from the post office in Worcester, Massachusetts, where I was then living, a letter which would lead to my professional reputation being forever embalmed in another's—though I couldn't know it then. Was it my extinction or my preservation?

EMILY

A death blow is a life blow to some...

HIGGINSON

To that day I'd lived an exemplary, even an enviable life. A frequent contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly*, I'd published a bit of advice to those who sought to do likewise. *A Letter to a Young Contributor*, I called it. This changed everything.

EMILY

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

HIGGINSON

Because *she* read it, you see! She read my advice—as if she needed any!

EMILY

The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask...

HIGGINSON

I was interested, of course. Who wouldn't be? A literate spinster, a bit younger than me, writes admiring letters... All that changed when I went to see her.

EMILY

Should you think my Verse alive—and had the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.

HIGGINSON (*still out front*)

I led a congregation in Worcester; a colored regiment in the war; a literary salon in Boston; I had a circle of the choicest friends: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne...

EMILY

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

HIGGINSON

Writing was the cistern into which I'd poured my accumulated life. But I digress...

EMILY (*insisting*)

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

HIGGINSON

She lived in her father's house, the large, square, brick mansion of a country lawyer—formerly a congressman. It was there I went to see her.

(Emily takes two daylilies from a sideboard and extends them to Higginson.)

EMILY

These are my introduction. Forgive me if I am frightened. I never see strangers and hardly know what I say.

HIGGINSON

Good God... I went to see her! (*He shakes off the memory.*) You must know that my ideas were as advanced as anybody's—more advanced! I helped finance John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry when Lincoln was still in a muddle about slavery!

EMILY

*His phosphoric toil!
The Slave—forgets—to fill—*

HIGGINSON (*the poem, he "hears"*)

Oh stop! Will you pursue me even now? Is your grave not warm enough?

EMILY

The Lamp—burns golden—on—

*Unconscious that the oil is out—
As that the Slave—is gone.*

HIGGINSON

Beautiful! But I'm not your slave, only your editor. *One* of your editors.

EMILY

A book is but a heart's portrait, Master—every page a pulse.

HIGGINSON

You called me “Master” and asked for instruction. Now you've mastered me.

EMILY (*smiling*)

Your phosphoric toil, Mr. Higginson!

HIGGINSON

I was a man perfectly of my time. You were ahead of yours.

EMILY

The Lamp—burns golden—on—

HIGGINSON

I was all breadth. You were all depth.

EMILY

And the Slave is gone!

(He watches her exit, then speaks out front.)

HIGGINSON

You'd think I'd be remembered for *some* of what I'd done. Some decent pages—a few quips? No. I am remembered (when I'm remembered at all) for having had two conversations and exchanged three dozen letters with an eccentric poetess who in later life never left her father's grounds.

EMILY (*re-entering, flirting*)

*The Soul selects its own society—
Then shuts the door.
Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing —
An Emperor kneeling on her Mat —
I've known her—from an ample nation —
Choose One —
Then—close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone*

HIGGINSON

Indeed. Like stone. I read a poem at your funeral. I'm remembered for that.

EMILY

I feel quick gratitude.

HIGGINSON

Not one of yours, of course. Miss Lavinia hadn't yet found your secret hoard.

EMILY

A death blow is a life blow to some.

HIGGINSON

Now that all of us are settled, safe in our alabaster chambers, I've dwindled to a Dickinson footnote. I never imagined how dull I would be one day. It crept up on me. Damn!

EMILY

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

HIGGINSON (*shifting into correspondence mode*)

Dear Miss Dickinson, thank you for your missive and the four poems you enclosed with it. It is only prudent to seek advice when contemplating an undertaking of this kind.

EMILY (*out front*)

He read them!

HIGGINSON (*out front*)

Yes, I read them. They were odd... spasmodic, broken. The rhymes imperfect or lacking entirely. The images powerful, but the meaning obscure.

EMILY (*to him*)

So?

HIGGINSON (*correspondence*)

In short, Miss Dickinson, while I admire the originality of your poems, I advise you to delay to publish...

EMILY

So!

HIGGINSON (*out front*)

I was an idiot—but how was I to know?

EMILY (*correspondence*)

I assure you publication was as foreign to my thoughts as firmament to fin.

HIGGINSON

“As firmament to fin!” That’s so good! But if she’s telling the truth, why write *to me*? To *me* who gave advice to young contributors...

EMILY

I do not print. My business is circumference! Still, for this advice, your scholar is beholden to you.

HIGGINSON

Mind you, in 1862 I was entirely right. The world wasn’t ready. Who knew it would *ever* be ready? Thirty years later Mabel Todd and I were still trying to make sense of them.

(Church bells ring, almost subliminally.)

MABEL *(off)*

Mr. Higginson!

(Emily senses Mabel’s approach. She tenses.)

HIGGINSON

Here, Mrs. Todd. What is it?

EMILY *(to an invisible Newfoundland hound)*

Carlo, come! Daffodils await!

(Emily exits. Mabel Todd enters holding the corrected proof of a poem. Like Lynn, she’s a brilliant woman whose literary intelligence eclipses many of her other qualities.)

MABEL

What are you doing out here?

HIGGINSON

Submitting to spirits. Communing with the dead. *A breathless death is not so cold as a Death that breathes.*

MABEL

Are you unwell? You’re very pale.

HIGGINSON

I was... reminiscing.

MABEL

This last line... you’ve marked a change.

HIGGINSON
Where?

MABEL
Here, the final line.

HIGGINSON
What did I change?

MABEL
“*The Grass has so little to do / I wish I were a Hay.*” You put “*the hay.*”

HIGGINSON
“Hay” is a collective singular. It requires the definite article.

MABEL
Emily put “*a Hay.*”

HIGGINSON
It cannot go so. People will think her mad.

MABEL
Wasn’t she?

HIGGINSON
No. Extremely neurasthenic, perhaps. Exhausting to speak with. Driven, certainly, but not mad. Shouldn’t it take the subjunctive? “*I wish I were the hay.*”

MABEL (*repeating the original*)
“*I wish I was a Hay.*”

HIGGINSON
We can repair this. She would want us to.

MABEL
She had time and occasion to repair it herself, but she didn’t.

HIGGINSON
She had time and occasion to do many things. I invited her to Boston many times. She was—here (*indicating the poem*)—laborious of thought, but—at the end of the day—incomprehensible.

MABEL
Entirely?

HIGGINSON

We can try to believe—as you seem to believe, Mrs. Todd—that the line merely breathes that inevitable obscurity of vast thought—to use Coleridge’s phrase—which can only be a compliment to the reader, but isn’t it also possible that the phrase is nonsense, pure and simple?

MABEL

It’s curious, Mr. Higginson; after I work on the poems I hear dashes when you speak.

HIGGINSON

En dashes or Em dashes?

MABEL

Manuscript dashes of varying length. Slanting dashes. We put in conventional punctuation for publication, but her dashes come back with speaking. I hear them instead of seeing them.

HIGGINSON

She used too many dashes. A solution of facility. Shouldn’t we emend the capitalization while we’re at it? Put a lower case “h” on “Hay”?

(Higginson marks the proof copy.)

MABEL

I don’t think she did anything facile. Making bread, perhaps. I wish I’d talked to her.

HIGGINSON

She would have sucked you dry. Snapped your spine in two. In conversation she was like someone on a cliff. Like an owl in the hen house—the owl and the hens, both. I’ve never talked to anyone who so drained my nerves.

MABEL

Still... I wish I was a Hay...

HIGGINSON

Indeed. If you work on these poems long enough, you’ll certainly become one. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Todd...

(Higginson exits. Emily re-enters and speaks to Mabel who remains oblivious.)

EMILY

Vinnie thinks Vermont is in Asia. She prefers Baldwin apples to fruits of the spirit. She says our time on earth is short and full—like an outgrown frock.

MABEL *(out front)*

It wasn’t my fault that men admired me. It was a gift. People found me fascinating. I was fascinated by their fascination. David loved me right away. And later Austin, so dignified and

noble—he loved me, too. Like a dynamo of love, they loved me together. Sue loved me at first. And her children loved me: Ned and Mattie and little Gib. Ned was enchanted by me. Sue sent us off on picnics in the countryside, me and the children. And then, later, she didn't love me and they didn't, and Ned was broken-hearted. *(A beat)* And Gib died. *(Another beat)* Lavinia loved me. After her sister died she came with a box of poems she'd found under the bed. She said she loved me and I was the one to get them published. She'd given them to Sue, but Sue had dilly-dallied and not got them published, so she didn't love Sue. *(A beat)* The manuscripts were in pencil and hard to read. I spent many nights transcribing and typing them on a primitive typewriter. You've probably never seen one like it: there was no lower case and only one key. You move a lever to the letter you wish to type, then press the key. *(A beat)* The poems had strange power. As I squinted at the penciled words and moved the lever I learned many of them by heart.

(As if by premonition, Emily opens the door for Lavinia, an ambulatory black pup tent of Victorian womanhood clutching a cat. Judith Werff might become an elderly spinster like this.)

LAVINIA

How are they coming, Mabel? It's been six months.

MABEL

Lavinia! Good morning!

LAVINIA

I don't understand why you don't just send them to the printer and be done with it.

MABEL

I told you, they need to be transcribed and sorted first.

LAVINIA

Isn't Mr. Higginson helping you?

MABEL

Mr. Higginson will help with the final selection, but you can't expect him to read these scribbles. The manuscripts are in terrible disarray.

LAVINIA

I want to see the book.

MABEL

I want to talk about the strip of land with the maple tree.

LAVINIA

I want to hold the book in my hands.

MABEL

David and I are counting on the strip of land to keep people from building right next door.

LAVINIA

It shouldn't take this long to edit a few poems.

MABEL

Amherst is growing so quickly...

LAVINIA

The printer would make sense of it. That's the printer's job.

MABEL

Austin intended for us to have it.

LAVINIA

Austin is dead. Emily is dead. I am the last of my line, the last of the Dickinsons—except for Mattie and Ned, of course. The poems are all that remain.

DAVID (*off*)

Mabel! Where are you?

MABEL

Here, David! (*to Lavinia*) My husband is home. I should attend to him.

LAVINIA

By all means, attend to him—but keep working on the poems. I want to hold the book in my hands.

(Mabel exits. Lavinia absent-mindedly hands the cat to Emily. The light changes from cottage to courthouse. We hear the judge's gavel.)

LAVINIA (*giving testimony*)

Yes, your honor. They were in the habit of coming to my house, my brother Austin and Mrs. Todd.

EMILY

The house you shared with your sister?

LAVINIA

Yes, with my sister Emily.

EMILY

Were they invited?

LAVINIA

I cannot say if they were invited or not. They came almost every afternoon. They stayed in the dining room. On a couch in front of the fire. The horsehair couch—in front of the fire.

EMILY

Did you see them there?

LAVINIA

I heard them there. *We* heard them there.

EMILY

What did you hear?

LAVINIA

We heard sounds.

EMILY

Sounds of conversation?

LAVINIA

Sounds of something I don't care to describe.

EMILY

The beast with two backs? Pompeii receiving the pumice of Vesuvius?

LAVINIA

No.

EMILY

Cries like conquistadors? The grunt of woodchucks?

LAVINIA

Not exactly...

EMILY

*A Route of Concupiscence,
With an evolving Squeal —
A Resonance of Emerald
A Rush of Cochineal —*

LAVINIA

Not exactly woodchucks.

EMILY

Did you hire Mrs. Todd to transcribe the poems?

LAVINIA

Mrs. Todd asked for the privilege of copying the poems. She was not hired to do it. There was never any question of payment. There was no mention of land with or without a maple tree.

(Mabel re-enters.)

MABEL *(giving testimony)*

I refer to the strip of land adjoining our house: 264 feet by 54 feet. It would destroy everything if anyone were to build on it. David and I have already landscaped it as garden.

EMILY *(to the cat)*

Maple leaves in November—as pretty as lawsuits!

LAVINIA *(under cross examination)*

I don't know anything about strips of land. My brother did all the accounts. My brother paid all the bills. Nothing was spent but it came from Austin.

MABEL *(to Lavinia)*

Austin promised us the land before he died. You know he did!

EMILY

Is that true?

LAVINIA

Austin took many engagements before he died. I am ignorant what engagements he took.

MABEL

She's lying! She's as shifty as her cats. She knew perfectly well what she was doing when she signed the deed to the maple tree. There was a witness, a lawyer from Northampton, Mr. Spaulerman...

LAVINIA

DON'T GIVE ME SPAULERMAN! I DON'T WANT TO HEAR SPAULERMAN!

EMILY

The court will not countenance eruptions! The court condemns all outbursts volcanic!

LAVINIA

She and that man came together one evening. I thought it was a social call. Mr. Spaulerman said he wanted to see my China. We went into the dining room to see my China. They had a paper for me to sign. They didn't say it was a deed.

MABEL *(to Lavinia)*

A pack of lies! I'll stop work on the poems until you take them back.

LAVINIA

I should take *the poems* back is what I should do!

MABEL

They're nothing but piles of paper—scraps, fragments. Nobody can make any sense of them.

EMILY

Objection, your honor!

LAVINIA

I should have left them with Sue! Sue knows more about poetry than you do!

(Gavel. Church bells. The light changes back to cottage.)

DAVID *(off)*

Mabel! Where are you?

MABEL

Here, David! *(to Lavinia)* My husband is home. I should attend to him.

LAVINIA

By all means, attend to him—but keep working on the poems. I want to hold the book in my hands. Good day to you.

(David Todd enters, a man as brilliant as Will Darvis, but more devious.)

DAVID

Miss Lavinia.

LAVINIA

Good day to you, too, David.

(Without acknowledging Emily, Lavinia retrieves the cat and exits.)

MABEL

Hello, dear.

(They kiss.)

DAVID

She seems upset. Sick kitten?

MABEL

All the Dickinsons are mad. I mentioned the maple tree. She pretended not to hear.

DAVID
Was Austin mad?

MABEL
No. Austin was... odd.

DAVID
He was mad about you, of course. Had been from the beginning.

MABEL
The beginning seems like another age!

DAVID
Fifteen years ago,

(Church bells. Lights change. Mabel and David have just arrived in Amherst. Emily hands Mabel a frilly parasol that Mabel rediscovers with rapture. Emily exits.)

MABEL
Ring the bell, David.

(David mimes ringing the bell at the Evergreens. Sue appears. Like Goulнора Dordona, she's an elegant woman, an accomplished hostess, and conscious of her rank.)

SUE
Well! Such a smart, young couple! You'll be very popular in Amherst, I foresee it! I proclaim it!

MABEL
You're very kind, Mrs. Dickinson.

SUE
Please, call me "Sue."

MABEL
Thank you, Sue.

SUE
Austin, emerge! We have visitors.

(Austin enters from his study. He resembles Emily in many ways but not in temperament: where Emily plays her reticence smoothly, Austin's heartiness is staccato.)

AUSTIN
Hullo? Ah, Todd. Finally arrived! Our newest instructor in the sciences!

SUE

And this is Mrs. Todd.

AUSTIN

So you've brought the wife! Charmed....

MABEL

Delighted to meet you, Squire Dickinson.

AUSTIN

Squire Dickinson? That's a bit old-fashioned, isn't it?

MABEL

But it suits you!

AUSTIN

Do you think so?

SUE

Have you found suitable lodging?

DAVID

We're at the new boarding house on Pleasant Street.

AUSTIN

Near the railway cut? Excellent. Father brought the railway here, you know. Counted it his greatest achievement, even above his service in Congress.

SUE

Is it just the two of you?

MABEL

We have our daughter, Millicent. She's two.

SUE

Our Gilbert is six.

AUSTIN (*to David*)

The telescope has been ordered. It should be here in two weeks. The trustees are still at labor over the observatory.

DAVID

I thought the observatory was settled.

SUE

Won't you come into the parlor?

MABEL

Such lovely paintings!

DAVID

Indeed.

AUSTIN

That's a Mařák. Collecting is a passion of mine—I go to showings in Boston whenever I can.

MABEL

The whole house is lovely! One is almost in Italy.

SUE

Thank you.

DAVID

And the big, brick house next door? I noticed there's a path between them...

AUSTIN

That's the Homestead. My sisters live there.

MABEL

You have sisters?

AUSTIN

Indeed. Two.

MABEL

And does Gilbert have any brothers or sisters?

SUE

Ned is twenty, Mattie sixteen.

DAVID

How nice.

(They exit toward the parlor. Emily enters and speaks in an urgent hiss.)

EMILY

Mr. Higginson!

(Higginson enters opposite.)

HIGGINSON

Miss Dickinson...

EMILY

Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our mind?

(She hands him a single sheet of paper, then hurries out. Higginson reads.)

HIGGINSON

What the devil does she mean? Miss Dickinson...

(Higginson exits in pursuit of Emily. There's an electric throb in the air as we flash forward to a subsequent afternoon. Lavinia and Mabel emerge from the Evergreens.)

LAVINIA

What a feast! When Sue entertains she pulls out all the stops—even for family!

SUE *(off)*

Children! Come say goodbye to Mabel and Aunt Lavinia.

(Sue enters with marionettes of her children: 16-year-old Mattie and 6-year-old "Gib.")

SUE / MATTIE

Goodbye Aunt Lavinia. Goodbye Mabel. Thank you for the piano lesson.

MABEL

You're quite welcome, Mattie. And thank you, Sue, for this scintillating afternoon!

SUE

It was my pleasure. Austin! Emerge! Mabel is leaving!

SUE / GIB

Don't go, Mabel! I don't wantchu to go!

SUE

Hush, Gib. Say goodbye.

SUE / GIB

I don't want Mabel to go!

SUE / MATTIE *(to Gib)*

She has to go sometime. She doesn't live here.

MABEL

Good bye, Mr. Gib. Watch little mousy for me.

SUE / GIB

I will.

AUSTIN (*entering*)

Do let me walk you home, Miss Mabel.

SUE

Well! That was said with alacrity!

LAVINIA

You have an admirer, Mabel.

AUSTIN

Indeed, she does! Who says otherwise gives false witness.

LAVINIA

You're not worried, Sue?

SUE

On the contrary, if there's someone the old sourpuss actually likes, I'm all rejoiced.

MABEL

Good night all. See you tomorrow!

(An electric throb. Moonlight. Austin walks Mabel on a darkened street.)

AUSTIN

I planted that spruce myself.

MABEL

We've gone past the boarding house.

AUSTIN

Walking with you... I hardly noticed. Mabel...

MABEL

Austin?

(They stand very close. Another throb. Late afternoon. Mabel and Austin keep the same attitude, but they're on the porch of the Evergreens a week later.)

LAVINIA (*off*)

Children! Come say goodbye. Mabel and I are leaving.

(Mabel and Austin separate hastily. Lavinia emerges from the house.)

LAVINIA (*RE: the children*)

They scatter like leaves

(Sue enters with marionettes as before.)

SUE

Here we are!

LAVINIA

At last.

SUE / MATTIE

We were playing hide and seek.

MABEL

Thank you, Sue, for this scintillating afternoon.

SUE

It was my pleasure. Say thank you for the piano lesson, Mattie.

SUE / MATTIE

Thank you for teaching me the song, Mabel.

MABEL

You're quite welcome, Mattie. Goodbye, Squire Dickinson!

AUSTIN

Thank you for coming, Mrs. Todd. You, too, Vinnie. Give my best to Emily.

(Emily enters behind.)

MABEL

Goodbye, Lavinia.

LAVINIA

You should have a cat.

MABEL

Goodbye, Gib!

SUE

Say goodbye, Gib.

SUE / GIB

G'bye! G'bye! G'bye! G'bye!

(Emily takes the Gib marionette and walks her nephew downstage while the other characters look on.)

LAVINIA

Goodby, Gib.

SUE

Now don't go playing in puddles, young man! You can get typhoid fever from a puddle!

SUE / GIB *(differently)*

G'bye! G'bye! G'bye!

(We hear a few sustained low notes on a cello. Emily leads the puppet into a pool of light.)

EMILY

*How short it takes to make a Life—
Then—Midnight, he has passed from thee
Unto the East, and Victory—*

SUE / GIB *(soft)*

G'bye!

EMILY

*Softly his Future climbs the Stair,
He fumbles at his Childhood's prayer
Eternity, he's coming—
Coming—on to thee!*

(The marionette flies out of sight. Sue faints. Lavinia kneels to revive her. Austin weeps convulsively. Mabel comforts him. Lights fade. When a new light is established the stage is empty. After a moment, David enters nervously. He carries lecture notes.)

DAVID

Good morning. I am Professor David Todd. I will be lecturing today on the planets. That is, not on the planets but *about* the planets.

(Laughter. Mabel enters with Lavinia and watches him admiringly.)

DAVID (CONT.)

Watch the sky from night to night: nearly everything appears to be fixed on a revolving sphere, the stars never changing their positions with reference to each other. But at nearly all times, one or two bright objects are visible which do not belong. The ancient astronomers detected their rebellious motions and gave them the name of planets; that is to say "wanderers."

(Mabel looks discretely at her watch and exits.)

DAVID (CONT.)

Sometimes they advance toward the east, then slow down and remain nearly stationary for different lengths of time. Then they retrograde, that is to say move toward the west.

(David has noticed Mabel's absence. He continues with increased agitation.)

DAVID (CONT.)

A study of all eight planets reveals a great variety of colors. Mercury has the color of pale ash; Venus, brilliant straw; Mars, reddish ochre; Jupiter, bright silver; Saturn, dull yellow; Uranus, pale green; Neptune, the same. The entire significance of these colors is not yet known. Apparently, they are indicant as to the degree and composition of atmosphere enveloping each. Of all the planets, Saturn is the least dense: it would float on water. Thank you.

(Polite applause.)

LAVINIA

That was wonderful, David! I'm so sorry Mabel missed the end.

DAVID

Me too. How is Sue?

LAVINIA

Sue hasn't left the house. It's been but two weeks.

DAVID

Did Austin not come?

LAVINIA

Whoever knows where Austin is?

(The lecture hall vanishes. Austin and Mabel are discovered by moonlight. Austin wears mourning.)

MABEL

No one can see us.

AUSTIN

Mabel...

MABEL

Dear friend...

AUSTIN

I love you, Mabel! Why should I not? Why should I not prefer sunshine to shadow? In this whole dark night, with my boy gone, like a plant I lean towards the light...

MABEL

It's what all plants do...

AUSTIN

When Caesar crossed the Rubicon there was no going back.

MABEL

Only forward.

AUSTIN

Will you cross the Rubicon with me?

MABEL

Yes, I will. Yes. *(They kiss.)* The Rubicon!

AUSTIN

The Rubicon!

(They kiss again. Crossfade to the Evergreens. Sue enters dressed in deep mourning. She sees something on the floor. Gib's mouse? She bends to pick it up but collapses in a paroxysm of weeping. Crossfade to the Homestead. Emily and Lavinia carry a tea table between them.)

LAVINIA

Over there, I think.

EMILY

Here?

LAVINIA

Splendid.

(The sisters lower the table. They set out cups and pour tea.)

EMILY

Hmm... Lapsong souchong?

LAVINIA

Austin's gift.

AUSTIN *(entering)*

I bought it in Boston.

LAVINIA

Of course. The Amherst merchants will never stock it.

EMILY

Tea is our China clipper. Our guide in all longitudes!

LAVINIA

It's delicious. Thank you.

AUSTIN

Dear sisters, I don't see you nearly enough.

EMILY

We see bobolinks oftener.

AUSTIN

If Mrs. Todd's visits to you coincided with mine? Would it inconvenience you?

(Pause)

LAVINIA

Inconvenience? No. But it would require planning...

AUSTIN

Emily?

EMILY

How often... would we be so honored?

AUSTIN

Afternoons, usually. Occasionally evenings. David teaches in the afternoons and observes the stars by night.

EMILY

When does he observe his wife?

AUSTIN

If you'd only see her, Emily. She's a wonderful young woman.

EMILY

I doubt it nothing.

AUSTIN

You've heard her sing and play.

EMILY

On the piano, not my brother.

LAVINIA

She's really rather sweet, Em. I find myself drawn to her.

EMILY

Like nightingales—will she eat your tongue?

AUSTIN

Em!

EMILY (*sharper*)

You asked if we'd be inconvenienced. How should we be inconvenienced? We're not inconvenienced by rainbows even though their trophy is a snare.

AUSTIN

Is it so very difficult?

EMILY

I don't know why you ask. Now that Carlo is dead, there's only the two of us and Maggie.

LAVINIA

And the cats.

EMILY

Both houses are yours. You can do what you like.

AUSTIN

I've brought her photograph.

EMILY

An icon, already?

LAVINIA

A good likeness. Look, Em.

EMILY

I've seen her from my window. I never doubted she was visible, but—like Bartelby—I'd prefer not to.

LAVINIA

Tush, Emily.

AUSTIN

Well... that will complicate our proceedings.

(Lights change. The siblings and the tea table vanish. Mabel is discovered at the boarding house, painting on fabric. David enters in a wet raincoat.)

MABEL

Ah, David.

DAVID

My dear!

MABEL

No umbrella?

DAVID

Forgot it.

(They kiss. David examines the painting.)

DAVID (CONT.)

That's coming along nicely.

MABEL

Do you think so?

DAVID

Hmmm.

MABEL

Austin was very passionate today. I think he's agitating... or at least *agitated*.

DAVID

About?

MABEL

He says he wants me utterly and completely.

DAVID

Do I understand correctly?

MABEL

He desires... the ultimate intimacy.

DAVID

So you've got him molten hot? A nova! I predicted it, remember.

MABEL
You were right.

DAVID
Is he up for it? Gib died less than a month ago.

MABEL
I think it would console him. What do you think?

DAVID
He's your fish to land, not mine.

MABEL
But you have more experience landing fish than I do. You've landed a great many. I've never been in the net with anyone but you.

DAVID
Is this to be your revenge?

MABEL
Of course not. Why do you speak of revenge?

DAVID
Only because you're entitled.

MABEL
I don't want revenge. I've tried to make a faithful husband of you. Fidelity is sacred to me.

DAVID
So out of fidelity you'd gratify the squire?

MABEL
That's not *why* I'd do it.

DAVID
But you *would* do it? You're inclined that way?

MABEL
I think I am.

(Pause.)

DAVID
It occurred to me the other day that Austin is exactly the same age as your father.

MABEL

I don't see what that imports.

DAVID

Question of taste—I don't much care for older women.

MABEL

Is that all it is for you? A question of appetite, a function of the palate?

DAVID

That you must tell me—it's your palate that's in question.

MABEL

It would be *a flowing together*. It would save him, resurrect him, make him whole.

DAVID

Un-huh.

MABEL

An *ennoblement*...

DAVID

Isn't he rigid with nobility already?

MABEL

David! I'd be doing this for you. You can't be innocent of the advantages—professional advantages—for *you*.

DAVID

Oh, I know! As College Treasurer Austin has more power than all the trustees put together.

MABEL

And he's used it on your behalf...

DAVID

To some extent...

MABEL

A promotion. Less teaching!

DAVID

But I was promised an observatory. He hired me as director of the College Observatory, a nebulous facility that exists on paper only. I'm also sick of teaching middling math to middling students with middling minds.

MABEL

He wants you to do more research. He let you go to California for the transit of Venus.

DAVID

If he's tugging you, I'll have permission to go much further and stay away much longer.

MABEL

Don't be vulgar.

DAVID

I'm sorry. The subject of the observatory naturally leads me to make observations. If some of the observations are vulgar, it's not my fault. Where would you do it?

MABEL

At the sisters' house.

DAVID

Upstairs or down?

MABEL

Down, I should think. It's warmer.

DAVID

With the spinster sisters and their servant safely out of the way?

MABEL

Don't be impossible! Would you prefer it to happen here, in a rooming house with Millicent under foot?

DAVID

Maybe we should get a place of our own? You might mention it to Austin.

MABEL

David, this is not a mercenary arrangement. I won't let you'd make a courtesan of me.

DAVID

You said there'd be advantages...

MABEL

I said it, but they're not uppermost in mind.

DAVID

What's uppermost in mind?

(A rumble of thunder outside.)

DAVID (CONT.)

This is your project, my love. If you want it, do it—but we might as well get something from it. What's a cottage more or less to the Dickinsons?

MABEL

I'd be amply requited if I can assuage the grief of a noble heart who's suffered horribly. Susan is no help to him. She's bitter. She's enclosed in her mourning, *enveloped* in it. They scarcely talk.

(Pause)

DAVID

The black, horsehair couch? Pulled up before the fire?

MABEL

I suppose so. I didn't expect you to be concerned with practicalities.

DAVID

He hasn't made a specific proposition? No hint of when and how?

MABEL

He's extremely discrete—and far more delicate than you could ever be. In his last note he wrote “we find ourselves before the holy of holies.”

DAVID

That sounds like the horsehair couch to me.

MABEL

YOU'RE MAKING THIS NASTY WHEN I DON'T MEAN IT TO BE!

DAVID

Shhh. You'll wake Millicent.

MABEL

THEN *DON'T* BE SO CYNICAL. It doesn't become you.

DAVID

Well don't be so... *lofty*. What if you conceive?

MABEL

I'm barren the last ten days of my cycle. I would time it, of course.

DAVID

His nobility doesn't know to use a rubber condom?

MABEL

How would I know?

DAVID

What *do* you talk about? All this “noble heart” and “holy of holies” seems to occult reality all together. Is Sue to know?

MABEL

Of course not.

DAVID

And Emily and Lavinia?

MABEL

No. I mean, I don't know.

DAVID

If you and Austin encounter the holy of holies in the dining room while they cower upstairs, they *will* know. Do you intend to give them advance warning?

MABEL

That's entirely up to Austin. They're his sisters. Lavinia supports us.

DAVID

And Emily?

MABEL

How would I know? How does anybody know what Emily thinks? She likes me. She sent down a poem and a bunch of flowers when I went to play and sing.

DAVID

Did you keep the poem?

(Mabel hands him a small slip of paper.)

DAVID

Jesus! What's this word? “Obliges”?

MABEL

No, it's “obloquies.”

DAVID

What does it mean?

MABEL
 “Obloquies?”

DAVID
 The *poem*. What does the poem mean?

MABEL
 I don’t know. I looked up “obloquies.” It means “slanders.”

DAVID
 “The slanders of etiquette”?

MABEL
 Or it could mean “slanders *against* etiquette.”

DAVID
 And “importunity” means “insisting”?

MABEL
 But it can also mean coming at the wrong time—the opposite of *opportunity*.

DAVID
 Either way it doesn’t sound good. Do you think she means you and Austin?

MABEL
 “*Insisting*” or “*coming at the wrong time*”?

DAVID
 Perhaps both. You’re always over there.

MABEL
 Read the whole thing out loud. Sometimes it helps.

DAVID
 “*Their dappled importunity
 Disparage or dismiss—
 The Obloquies of Etiquette
 Are obsolete to Bliss.*”

(Pause.)

MABEL
 Again.

DAVID

*“Their dappled importunity
Disparage or dismiss—
The Obloquies of Etiquette
Are obsolete to Bliss.”*

(Another rumble of thunder.)

MABEL

I don't know what it means.

DAVID

You said there were flowers?

MABEL

Adder's tongue.

DAVID

“How sharper than an adder's tongue it is to have a thankless child...”

MABEL

But that's just the flower's *name*! And the leaves are *dappled*.

DAVID

So it's *the flower* that's insisting?

MABEL

Or maybe it's coming at the wrong time—the flower is.

DAVID

What's the right time for adder's tongue?

MABEL

I don't know, but I bet Emily does.

DAVID (*quicker*)

*“Their dappled importunity
Disparage or dismiss—
The Obloquies of Etiquette
Are obsolete to Bliss.”*

MABEL

The only thing that's clear is *Bliss*. She's above it all.

DAVID

How can you be above *a flower*?

MABEL

Maybe she means Austin and me AND the flower.

(David hands back the poem.)

MABEL (CONT.)

Lavinia carries messages for us. She approves. She'd be happy to see Austin dredged from the pit of despair... She loves her brother.

DAVID

Lavinia loves him. *You* love him. *Amherst* loves him. Does anybody not love Austin?

MABEL

You're impossible!

DAVID

Admit that it's amusing: a middle-aged Romeo of high standing and impeccable moral fiber plans to hump a woman half his age who's married to a professor *he* hired and *he* asked the trustees to promote, but he doesn't see his own interest at all. He thinks he's ascending a spiritual Olympus even as he does nothing to protect you from pregnancy. I don't like it! I don't want us raising Austin's bastard; Millicent's trouble enough.

MABEL

We wouldn't raise Austin's bastard! I'll see to it. I'll educate him on the limits of our congress.

DAVID

Oh, *congress*, is it? And what if Austin's father, the *congressman*, saw the *congress*? I can imagine the look on his sour, puritan face when he learns that his first-born is ploughing a furrow through the faculty wives!

MABEL

Austin isn't like that.

DAVID

You mean he's not like his father or that a single faculty wife will do?

MABEL

Austin isn't like *you*! You have no notion of faithfulness; you have no *alliance*.

(Thunder again, nearer.)

DAVID

I have an alliance with you.

MABEL

I knew you wouldn't understand. You'd make a joke out of it. And yes, I know you'll throw it back at me that because I'm asking permission to be unfaithful I shouldn't talk about faithfulness, but that's precisely the point: I'm asking permission, unlike you who always took permission for granted. I'm asking permission to be intimate with a close friend of ours who's helped us in so many ways...

DAVID

Would he undress, do you think?

MABEL

I don't know.

DAVID

Would you?

MABEL

If he wants me to.

DAVID

Do you think he'd let me watch?

MABEL

Stop it!

DAVID

From a distance...

MABEL

STOP IT THIS INSTANT!

DAVID

The 3-inch refractor with terrestrial eyepiece would do the trick!

MABEL

Will you be serious? I have to give an answer.

DAVID

When?

MABEL

Soon. I can't pretend I don't understand him.

(A tremendous clap of thunder, very near. Millicent screams offstage.)

MABEL

DAMN NEW ENGLAND! DAMN IT! DAMN IT ALL!

(Mabel exits to comfort Millicent. Emily rushes on, flinging the words at David.)

EMILY

Wild nights—Wild nights!

Wild nights—Wild nights!

(David can't hear. She circles him like a panther as he speaks out front.)

DAVID

It turned out to be not a bad arrangement for either of us. I had many women: wives of faculty; wives of former students—come to fondle my telescope.

EMILY *(under this)*

Wild nights—Wild nights...

DAVID

And she had Austin. Quite content there, quite... *exalted*. A few years on and the cottage came. I say "cottage," but it has nine rooms. Austin was my best friend in Amherst...

EMILY *(softer still)*

Wild nights—Wild nights...

DAVID *(near tears)*

Only Mabel! So much of you I finally lost to him! So much I lost!

(David exits weeping. Emily works the poem in private.)

EMILY

Wild nights—

When I am with thee...

Wild nights... da-da.... our reliquary!

(Lavinia enters holding a kitten.)

LAVINIA

Poor little Cerberus, they've taken your couch, haven't they? Moved it in front of the fire! The horsehair couch where you like to nap, dreaming of horses' mains and horses' tails! Now it goes "creeee, creee," your couch does. What a fright for little Cerberus! What a fright for us all! "Creee, creee, Creee, creee, Creee, creee" In and out: "creee, creee, creee, creee..." Do you think they'll break it?

(Lavinia exits.)

EMILY

Furtive—the winds... Futile—the winds...

(Crossfade. Austin primps before a mirror at the Evergreens. Sue enters.)

SUE

You're going out?

AUSTIN

I don't know how long. Don't wait up.

SUE

I won't.

EMILY

Wild nights—Wild nights!

(Austin exits. Sue turns and discovers Mabel, waiting. The women stare at each other, transfixed with hatred. After a moment Mabel turns and exits, her head lowered.)

EMILY

*Da-da with thee...
Wild nights have been.... our luxury!*

(An electric throb. Higginson enters with the proof of a poem.)

HIGGINSON

Mrs. Todd! An opinion, please!

EMILY

*Da-da with thee...
Wild nights... Wild nights...*

(Mabel enters. She's thirteen years older.)

MABEL

Yes, Mr. Higginson?

HIGGINSON

One poem only I dread a little to print—this wonderful “Wild Nights.” I tremble lest the malignant read into it more than the virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there.

(He hands her the sheet.)

EMILY

*Wild nights—Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!*

MABEL

I see what you mean.

HIGGINSON

Has Miss Lavinia any shrinking about it?

MABEL

I don't know. I don't know if she's read it.

HIGGINSON

You will understand my solicitude, yet what a loss to omit it! Indeed, it is not to be omitted!

MABEL

You're quite right. It must go in.

(They exit. Emily is alone on stage. Her joy in composition is palpable.)

EMILY

*Futile—the winds—
To a Heart in port—
Done with the Compass—
Done with the Chart!*

*Rowing in Eden—
Ah—the Sea!
Might I but moor—tonight—
In thee!*

(She skips off to write it down. Church bells. Austin primps in front of a mirror at the Evergreens. Sue watches.)

SUE

My dear husband...

AUSTIN

Wife.

SUE

Allow me, please, to point out something that has perhaps escaped your notice.

AUSTIN

Concerning?

SUE

Concerning Mrs. Todd, your mistress. The woman you proclaim to be the love of your life...

AUSTIN (*bristling*)

What of her?

SUE

May I begin again?

AUSTIN

Please do.

SUE

My dear husband...

AUSTIN

Wife.

SUE

You have withdrawn your love from me and from the children. You say we were never worthy of your love to begin with...

AUSTIN

Saving Gib.

SUE

Saving Gib.

AUSTIN

Only Gib cared for me.

SUE

You say this house holds nothing for you. You say that Mattie and Ned and I should renounce any claim on your feelings as father and husband. But Mrs. Todd has made no such renunciation. She still has her David. She doesn't refuse his affection or his bed. She still has her Millicent. She accepts her daughter's love and, I suppose, returns it.

AUSTIN

So?

SUE

So Mrs. Todd has enjoined you to a sacrifice without making the corresponding sacrifice herself.

AUSTIN

It's a small sacrifice I've made, I assure you. I have received no support or understanding in this house since eighteen hundred and eighty-three.

SUE

So you say. You say you feel abandoned by us, that Mrs. Todd provides all the love and admiration you need or could desire. But she would not say as much of you. She could not.

AUSTIN

Nonsense!

SUE

You may be important in the group of those she loves, but you're not the unique specimen. Not the only tree in the meadow. So I wonder if you aren't getting the worst of the deal.

AUSTIN

Oh she is right about you! You are the Great Moghul, the black dog that guards the stair, the ogre of the Evergreen castle. She prays for you to die!

SUE

I'm touched by her prayers, but do not return them: Mrs. Todd may live. I only pray that she'll allow my husband to live as well—and open his eyes to the nasty bargain she's set for him.

AUSTIN

To what bargain do you refer?

SUE

Isn't it obvious? In your heart of hearts, isn't it obvious?

AUSTIN

It is not.

SUE

She's driven you onto a peninsula while she roams the continent wide! It's obvious to everyone, I should think—to all of Amherst *except* Austin Dickinson, a man I married thinking he might disappoint me in many ways but never, never in this: I never thought you'd prove a fool!

AUSTIN

You disgust me. You never loved me. You care more about the wallpaper than you do me!

SUE

The wallpaper has got to go. I feel jaundiced looking at it.

AUSTIN

When I first saw you—at church in your black dress—I told myself “she would do—she has class.” I was wrong. You don’t have class, you are of it: so proper, so proud, so careful of the house, so careless of me. All that remains is black.

SUE

Your wig is crooked, dear. Let me fix it...

AUSTIN

Thank you, I shall fix it myself.

SUE

It’s still crooked.

AUSTIN

Do not attend to me! I attend to myself! I attend to myself in all things!

SUE

What will Mrs. Todd say if your wig is crooked?

AUSTIN

What Mrs. Todd says or does not say does not concern you!

SUE

Why don’t you take her a painting? I don’t care for your paintings, dark and muddy landscapes for the dark and muddy thing you’ve become.

AUSTIN (*holding back tears*)

How I hate and despise you! How I curse the day I made you a Dickinson! Only little Gib ever loved me and now he’s gone! He’s gone!

SUE

Yes, Gib is gone. The paintings should go, too. The wallpaper is revolting. Go. Weep!

AUSTIN

The black dog has swallowed my life!

(Austin moves to exit, but Emily intercepts him with an embrace.)

EMILY

My poor brother!

AUSTIN

Oh, Em... Em! Why must I suffer so?

EMILY

The strength to perish is sometimes withheld.

AUSTIN

The pain, Em! It's unbearable!

(Austin collects himself.)

EMILY

No. Keep on weeping. Weep always! Stoicism is more terrible than sorrow; it is the stubble of the soil where sorrow grew.

AUSTIN

Thank you. I must go to Mrs. Todd.

(Emily releases him. He exits. Sue has been busy at the mirror. Now she speaks out front.)

SUE

Of all nature, human nature quickens me most. One can exist on snowy peaks or apple orchards—one can dream of pansies and buttercups—but to *live*, to truly live, one needs contact with the higher life of the mind. Emerson once stayed at my house. *(A single bell chimes)* But of that life I've had naught these many a year. Massachusetts oppresses me with its cold, hard forms, solemn yet beautiful to view. Ours is Old Testament scenery, kin to the landlocked plains of Central Asia hemmed by giant crags.

EMILY

The foothills of grief!

SUE

Emily!

EMILY

It's difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place.

SUE

You're out and about!

EMILY

And so are you! I thought perhaps you were in Heaven.

SUE

No. Amherst.

EMILY

To see you seems quite sweet, and wonderful, and surprises me so.

SUE
It surprises me also.

EMILY
I never flinched through our parting.

SUE
You were always the brave one.

EMILY
I held my life so tight you could not see the wound.

SUE
I regret the wound, but I did not inflict it.

EMILY
But you did, you clumsy thing! When my hands are cut, your fingers will be found inside.

SUE
I live right next door. There's a path...

EMILY
Such a path!

SUE
I never parted from you...

EMILY
Perhaps I only grazed your taste. Perhaps my odd, backwoodsman ways troubled your finer nature.

SUE
Nonsense!

EMILY
I'm dull at patrician things.

SUE
It was you who parted from me—and all beings else.

EMILY
Not so.

SUE
You put on white to worship immobility. You made yourself a pillar of salt!

EMILY

Like Lot's wife who looked back on Sodom.

SUE

Don't insult me, Emily. And don't insult us.

EMILY

My lord, you once did love me—thirty years ago! Why do you torment my brother?

SUE

In our country adultery is not a joke. It is punished. Must it not be?

(Emily exits. Sue watches her go before exiting opposite. Lights change. Austin and Mable are at the tea table in the Homestead. Austin pours.)

AUSTIN *(an attempt at breeziness)*

I had a conversation with the Black Moghul today.

MABEL

What did she say?

AUSTIN

She pointed out to me a certain point of inequity... of disequilibrium, I should say, a lack of congruence in our two positions.

MABEL

Which is?

AUSTIN

I have renounced my spouse and living children, but you haven't renounced yours.

MABEL

I see. And what did you say?

AUSTIN

I didn't know what to say. I could make no reply. She seemed dead sure of herself. Like my sister sometimes when she looks straight at me...

MABEL

Lavinia?

AUSTIN

OF COURSE NOT LAVINIA! *EMILY!* Emily has a look she that slices round-ways into your soul, like coring an apple. You've never seen it?

MABEL

How could I? Emily has never let me see *her* so how could I see her *look*?

AUSTIN

I'm sorry, holy one. Forgive me.

MABEL

Except once—a figure in white, moving quickly down the hall—moving away from me.

AUSTIN

She's reticent—extremely shy...

MABEL

But I've seen Sue and Sue has never frightened me. I've felt admiration for her. And love. And fierce jealousy—because she had you.

AUSTIN

My darling...

MABEL

And she still has you! Otherwise she couldn't drive her thorns between us—as she clearly did this morning.

AUSTIN

But what was I to say? What answer make? You still have David and Millicent—not that I would wish it otherwise. You know how fond I am of David... and of Millicent...

MABEL

You have Emily! You can see her whenever you like—face to face. **YOU SEE EMILY FACE TO FACE!**

(Mabel exits in tears. Austin pursues her. "My soul, my angel, what did I say!" Crossfade to the boarding house. David enters with a Millicent marionette.)

DAVID / MILLICENT

Momma? Where are you? I'm home from school! Momma? Momma!

(Mabel enters, flushed, having run from the Homestead.)

MABEL

Millicent! Welcome home!

DAVID / MILLICENT

Today the teacher made us copy sayings on cards. Lots and lots of cards, one saying on each card....

MABEL

Go and change your clothes, dear. Then you can tell me about the cards.

DAVID / MILLICENT

Can I have an apple?

(David walks the marionette into the wings.)

MABEL

David?

DAVID *(off)*

Yes?

MABEL

I had a strange conversation with Austin this afternoon.

DAVID *(off)*

What about?

MABEL

It ended up about Emily, but that's not where it started at all.

DAVID *(entering)*

Where did it start?

MABEL

He implied that I had forced him to give up his family, but that I hadn't given up mine—not that he'd asked me to, but Sue pointed this out to him, the viper.

DAVID

Sue and Austin are talking?

MABEL

They talked this morning. Sue seems to think I should betray and abandon you for symmetry's sake.

DAVID

How did you get from there to Emily?

MABEL

I'm not certain, actually, but I remember telling him that he could see Emily whenever he wanted. It's not as if he has no family because of us. He has family we don't see.

DAVID

But Emily doesn't not see you in particular; Emily not sees everybody.

MABEL

I know. I just... I just want to see her.

DAVID

One day you will.

MABEL

Do you think so?

DAVID

In her coffin.

(The boarding house vanishes. A few low notes on a cello. Emily is discovered standing as if dead in a coffin. A single bell chimes. She doubles over with laughter. She throws the funeral flowers to the audience like a bride's bouquet. A series of powerful electric throbs. The stage is a no-man's-land of conflicts swirling forward. Characters speak on entering. Emily reacts to each exchange but can't intervene.)

SUE

Austin! AUSTIN! I know you're there. Why don't you answer?

AUSTIN

Of course, I saw Mrs. Todd when I was in Boston. I don't see why you frame this in a tone of accusation; it's one of the things I went to Boston to do!

(Austin exits.)

MABEL

Austin? Are you there? Oh!

(She has found Sue instead.)

SUE

Mrs. Todd, suffice it to say that I am apprised of your relations with my husband.

MABEL

The squire is a very dear friend.

SUE

So were you—once—a friend to me!

(Sue turns and exits.)

AUUUUSTIIIIIN!
MABEL

I'm here, my Angel. Take comfort.
AUSTIN

(They kiss.)

You dear old man! You're so noble and so handsome...
MABEL

...and you have so much money.
DAVID

Do you suck his prick? Is that how you do it?
SUE *(re-entering)*

Isn't that how everybody does it?
DAVID

ARRRRRRRAH!
MABEL

(Mabel chases David offstage. Austin goes after her crying "My Empress...")

The path grows poisonous.
EMILY *(to Sue)*

It's marriage. You know nothing about it.
SUE

(Sue exits. Lavinia and David enter, arm in arm.)

Perhaps Mabel's visits shouldn't coincide with Austin's quite so often; Emily is ill.
LAVINIA

I'll tell her.
DAVID

My clocks need winding.
LAVINIA

I'll come by this evening. Till then.
DAVID

LAVINIA

Till then.

(David exits.)

AUSTIN

When I'm gone, Lavinia, you'll transfer the strip of land with the maple tree?

LAVINIA

Yes, Austin! How often must I tell you?

SUE *(to Austin)*

Are you going to see your whore again?

AUSTIN *(back at her)*

You disgust me. You make vomit my soul!

LAVINIA

Tush, Austin!

(Lavinia exits.)

HIGGINSON

Ah, Squire Dickinson!

AUSTIN

Umm... Col. Higginson, isn't it? Welcome to Amherst. You've come for commencement?

HIGGINSON

The poems your sister has sent me are quite extraordinary—like nothing else I've read.

AUSTIN

Really? I hadn't thought they had any special quality.

(Sue glares.)

HIGGINSON

"Zero at the bone," Mr. Dickinson: what does the phrase suggest to you?

AUSTIN

I'm afraid I don't know what anything means.

MABEL *(off)*

Austin?

AUSTIN

Will you excuse me?

(Austin exits. Higginson is about the repeat his question to Sue, but decides not to. Sue turns on her heel and exits. Higginson also exits. We hear a few low notes on a cello as David walks out the Millicent marionette.)

DAVID / MILLICENT *(out front)*

Momma never saw her, but I did. Her hair was red. She wore it in braids coiled like snakes on her head. There was a net over the snakes. She smiled at me and bent down with a cookie on a plate. I took the cookie. *(a single bell chimes.)* When she lay dying Momma took me to the Homestead. The doctor said it wouldn't be long. Momma took me home and then went to choir practice. She got back at eight, but Miss Dickinson died at six.

EMILY

Land Ho! Eternity!
Eternity!
Ashore at last!

(As leaves fall off the maple tree, Emily dances her deliverance. The dance is halted by an electric throb. Lavinia enters with a full-grown cat.)

LAVINIA

The maple tree is settled, Cerberus, the judge said they shan't have it. Austin wouldn't approve, but Austin is dead. And little Millicent whom we suffered to eat apples behind the kitchen door? Will she still come? We can't abide the sound of an apple crunching, can we, Pus? So perhaps it's just as well.

(Millicent exits, crestfallen. Emily watches her shuffle off.)

EMILY

*The Horror not to be surveyed—
But skirted in the Dark—
With Consciousness suspended—
And Being under Lock—*

(Lavinia also heads offstage. Emily enlarges the poem to include her.)

EMILY (CONT.)

*I fear me this—is Loneliness—
The Maker of the soul
It's Caverns and it's Corridors
Illuminate—or seal—*

LAVINIA (*just before exiting*)

But who will wind my clocks?

HIGGINSON (*who overheard the poem.*)

Wonderful! Wonderful! Not to be omitted!

EMILY

Thank you. (*a beat*) Are you ready?

(Higginson nods. Emily guides him downstage. Polite applause as he opens his notes. An electric throb as we cut to the middle of his lecture.)

HIGGINSON

Her third letter struck a different note. I'd asked about her reluctance to travel. She replied...

EMILY

"I shun men and women. They talk of hallowed things aloud and embarrass my dog."

HIGGINSON

In the same letter she said...

EMILY

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

HIGGINSON

And later she said...

EMILY

"Do not try to be saved, but let redemption find you."

HIGGINSON

And once...

EMILY

"Science is very near us: I found a megatherium on my strawberry."

HIGGINSON

For those of you who've never encountered one, a megatherium is a ground sloth, big as an elephant, that died out 10,000 years ago. On the art of poetry, there was this:

EMILY

"If I read a book that 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."

HIGGINSON

Later came a question that puzzles me still. She asked...

EMILY

“Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our mind?”

HIGGINSON

At last, after many postponements, on August 16, 1870, I found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent.

(The lecture hall fades, but not entirely. Emily takes two daylilies from the sideboard.)

EMILY

These are my introduction. Forgive me if I am frightened. I never see strangers and hardly know what I say. I have a brother and sister who live next door. I have another sister here. My mother does not care for thought and Father is too busy. He buys me books but begs me not to read them lest they joggle my mind. He prefers my bread to any other, so I am occupied. *(a beat)* And people must have puddings. I thank you for your visit. But speak. I speak too much. I know the butterfly, and the lizard and the orchid; are these your countrymen? But speak! I have no monarch in my life and cannot rule myself. If I am caught by the dawn or the sunset sees me—the only kangaroo among the beauty—then that afflicts me. *(a beat)* Speak! I cannot drop the bells whose jingling cools my tramp, so speak—please! The bells that cool my tramp... Speak! When I try to organize, my little force explodes; it leaves me bare and charred. Only speak! Don't let me talk on and on!

HIGGINSON

I...

EMILY

Tell me: how do people live without any thought? How do they manage? How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning?

HIGGINSON

I'm afraid really I don't know.

EMILY *(trembling)*

I am not like them. I find ecstasy in living. The mere sense of living is joy enough. O! O!

(She finds she's been beating the daylilies one against the other until only the stems remain. With a cry of frustration, she throws the stems at Higginson and runs offstage. Higginson moves to follow, but remembers his audience. He opens a portfolio like a musical score and announces...)

HIGGINSON

Franklin three-six-nine: *Those Fair, Fictitious People*, with variants.

(Characters from both acts enter as they speak. They carry scores like Higginson's.)

HIGGINSON (CONT.)

Those fair—fictitious People —

AUSTIN

Those *new*—fictitious People—
The Women—plucked away

HIGGINSON

The Women—*slipped* away

AUSTIN

From our familiar Lifetime—

HIGGINSON

...familiar *address*—

AUSTIN

...familiar *gazing*—

JUDITH

Those fair—fictitious people—
The women—plucked away
From our familiar Lifetime—

HIGGINSON

...familiar *notice*—

AUSTIN

...familiar *fingers*—

JUDITH

The women—plucked away

LYNN

The Men of Ivory—
Those Boys and Girls, in Canvas—
Who stay upon the Wall

JUDITH

...Who *dwell* upon the Wall

LYNN

In Everlasting Keepsake—

...Everlasting <i>Childhood</i> Where are <i>they</i> ?	JUDITH
<i>Where</i> are they?	HIGGINSON
Where <i>are</i> they?	AUSTIN
Can Anybody tell?	JUDITH
Can <i>you</i> tell?	LYNN
We trust—in places perfecter— Inheriting Delight Beyond our faint Conjecture—	GOULNORA
Delight <i>Beyond</i> ...	HIGGINSON
<i>Beyond</i> our faint...	AUSTIN
Delight <i>Beyond</i> ...	GOULNORA
Delight <i>Beyond</i> ...	JUDITH
Delight <i>Beyond</i> ...	LYNN
...Delight <i>Beyond</i> our faint Conjecture—	GOULNORA
our <i>small</i> Conjecture—	JUDITH
Our dizzy Estimate—	LYNN

GOULNORA

Our *scanty* Estimate—

WILL

Remembering ourselves, we trust—
 Yet Blessed—than We—
 Through Knowing—where We only hope—

LYNN

...where We only *guess*
 Receiving—where we—pray—

WILL

Beholding—where we—pray—

EMILY

Of Expectation—also—
 Anticipating us
 With transport, that would be a pain
 Except for Holiness—

Esteeming us—as Exile—
 Themselves—admitted Home—
 Through gentle Miracle of Death—

GOULNORA

curious Miracle of Death—

EMILY

easy Miracle of Death—

GOULNORA

...admitted Home—
 Through gentle Miracle of Death—

EMILY

The Way ourself, must come—

(A single bell chimes. During the following recapitulation, Emily speaks, sings or shouts boldface words and passages in syncopation with the speaker. Sometimes she's a shade ahead, sometimes a bit behind.)

HIGGINSON (*quicker*)

Those fair—fictitious People—
The Women—plucked away

From our familiar Lifetime—
The Men **of Ivory**—

JUDITH

Those Boys and Girls, in **Canvas**—
Who stay upon **the Wall**
In Everlasting Keepsake—
Can **Anybody** tell?

WILL

We trust—in places **perfecter**—
Inheriting Delight
Beyond our faint Conjecture—
Our dizzy **Estimate**—

LYNN

Remembering ourselves, **we trust**—
Yet **Blesseder**—than We—
Through Knowing—where We **only hope**—
Receiving—**where we**—pray—

AUSTIN

Of Expectation—**also**—
Anticipating us
With transport, that would be a pain
Except for Holiness—

GOULNORA

Esteeming us—**as Exile**—
Themselves—**admitted** Home—
Through gentle Miracle of **Death**—

(a single bell chimes)

ALL

The Way ourselves, must come—

(End of play)