

# Readings from the Book of Emily

2020 Ocean Book Club

David Bordelon  
dbordelon@ocean.edu

## The Poems

Dates and order and text of poems are, for the most part, conjectural and are based on R. W Franklin's 1999 edition. Date indicated is first finished draft.

1263 (1872)

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth's superb surprise  
 As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind —

785 (1863)

It dropped so low — in my Regard —  
 I heard it hit the Ground —  
 And go to pieces on the Stones  
 At bottom of my Mind —

Yet blamed the Fate that flung it — less  
 Than I reviled Myself,  
 For entertaining Plated Wares  
 Upon my Silver Shelf —

124 (1859, 1862)

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers —  
 Untouched by Morning —  
 And untouched by Noon —  
 Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection —  
 Rafter of satin, and Roof of stone —

Grand go the years  
 In the crescent above them;  
 Worlds scoop their arcs —  
 And firmaments — row —  
 Diadems — drop —  
 And Doges — surrender —  
 Soundless as Dots  
 On a Disc of snow.

236 (1861)

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —  
 I keep it, staying at Home —  
 With a Bobolink for a Chorister —  
 And an Orchard, for a Dome —

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice —  
 I just wear my Wings —  
 And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
 Our little Sexton — sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman —  
 And the sermon is never long,  
 So instead of getting to Heaven, at least —  
 I'm going, all along.

269 (1861)

Wild Nights — Wild Nights!  
 Were I with thee  
 Wild Nights should be  
 Our luxury!

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!

320 (1862)

There's a certain Slant of light,  
 Winter Afternoons —  
 That oppresses, like the Heft  
 Of Cathedral Tunes —

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —  
 We can find no scar,  
 But internal difference —  
 Where the Meanings, are —

None may teach it — Any —  
 'Tis the seal Despair —  
 An imperial affliction  
 Sent us of the Air —

When it comes, the Landscape listens —  
 Shadows — hold their breath —  
 When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
 On the look of Death —

372 (1862)

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —  
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —  
 The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'

And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –  
A Wooden way  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –  
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

---

409 (1862)

The Soul selects her own Society –  
Then – shuts the Door –  
To her divine Majority –  
Present no more –

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –  
At her low Gate –  
Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat –

I've known her – from an ample nation –  
Choose One –  
Then – close the Valves of her attention –  
Like Stone –

---

446 (1862)

This was a Poet – It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings –  
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species  
That perished by the Door –  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –  
The Poet – it is He –  
Entitles Us – by Contrast –  
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of portion – so unconscious –  
The Robbing – could not harm –  
Himself – to Him – a Fortune –  
Exterior – to Time –

---

448 (1862)

I died for Beauty – but was scarce  
Adjusted in the Tomb  
When One who died for Truth, was lain  
In an adjoining room –

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?

"For Beauty", I replied –  
"And I – for Truth – Themselves are One –  
We Brethren, are", He said –

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –  
We talked between the Rooms –  
Until the Moss had reached our lips –  
And covered up – our names –

---

466 (1862)

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

---

469 (1862)

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –  
The Dews drew quivering and chill –  
For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity –

---

519 (1863)

This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me –  
The simple News that Nature told –  
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see –  
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –  
Judge tenderly – of Me

---

533 (1862)

I reckon – when I count at all –  
First - Poets – Then the Sun –  
Then Summer - Then the Heaven of God –  
And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems  
To Comprehend the Whole –  
The Others look a needless Show –  
So I write – Poets – All –

Their Summer – lasts a Solid Year –  
They can afford a Sun  
The East – would deem extravagant –  
And if the Further Heaven –

Be Beautiful as they prepare  
For Those who worship Them –  
It is too difficult a Grace –  
To justify the Dream –

---

598 (1863)

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –  
For – put them side by side –  
The one the other will contain  
With ease – and You – beside –

The Brain is deeper than the sea –  
For – hold them – Blue to Blue –  
The one the other will absorb –  
As Sponges – Buckets – do –

The Brain is just the weight of God –  
For – Heft them – Pound for Pound –  
And they will differ – if they do –  
As Syllable from Sound –

---

620 (1863)

Much Madness is divinest Sense –  
To a discerning Eye –  
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –  
'Tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail –  
Assent – and you are sane –  
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –  
And handled with a Chain –

740 (1863)  
On a Columnar Self –  
How ample to rely  
In Tumult – or Extremity –  
How good the Certainty

That Lever cannot pry –  
And Wedge cannot divide  
Conviction – That Granitic Base –  
Though None be on our Side –

Suffice Us – for a Crowd –  
Ourselves – and Rectitude –  
And that Assembly – not far off

From furthest Spirit – God –

---

764 (1863)

My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -  
In Corners - till a Day  
The Owner passed - identified -  
And carried Me away -

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -  
And now We hunt the Doe -  
And every time I speak for Him  
The Mountains straight reply -

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Upon the Valley glow -  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let it's pleasure through -

And when at Night - Our good Day done -  
I guard My Master's Head -  
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's  
Deep Pillow - to have shared -

To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -  
None stir the second time -  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -  
Or an emphatic Thumb -

Though I than He - may longer live  
He longer must - than I -  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without - the power to die -

---

788 (1863)

Publication – is the Auction  
Of the Mind of Man –  
Poverty – be justifying  
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather  
From Our Garret go  
White – Unto the White Creator –

Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –  
Then – to Him Who bear  
Its Corporeal illustration – Sell  
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant  
Of the Heavenly Grace –  
But reduce no Human Spirit  
To Disgrace of Price –

---

1577 (1882)

The Bible is an antique volume  
Written by faded men,  
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres–  
Subjects–Bethlehem–  
Eden–the ancient Homestead–  
Satan–the Brigadier,  
Judas–the great Defaulter,  
David–the Troubadour.  
Sin–a distinguished Precipice  
Others must resist,  
Boys that “believe”  
Are very lonesome–  
Other boys are “lost.”  
Had but the tale a warbling Teller  
All the boys would come–  
Orpheus’ sermon captivated,  
It did not condemn.

## Poems by Dickinson’s Contemporaries

### DEATH OF AN INFANT

Death found strange beauty on that cherub brow,  
And dash'd it out. There was a tint of rose  
On cheek and lip;–he touch'd the veins with ice,  
And the rose faded.–Forth from those blue eyes  
There spoke a wishful tenderness,–a doubt  
Whether to grieve or sleep, which Innocence  
Alone can wear. With ruthless haste he bound  
The silken fringes of the curtaining lids  
For ever. There had been a murmuring sound  
With which the babe would claim its mother's ear,  
Charming her even to tears. The spoiler set  
His seal of silence. But there beam'd a smile  
So fix'd and holy from that marble brow,–  
Death gazed and left it there;–he dared not steal  
The signet-ring of Heaven.

By Lydia H. Sigourney (1827)

---

### A PSALM OF LIFE

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG MAN  
SAID TO THE PSALMIST

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,  
Life is but an empty dream ! –  
For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real ! Life is earnest!  
And the grave is not its goal ;  
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,  
Is our destined end or way ;  
But to act, that each to-morrow  
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,  
In the bivouac of Life,  
Be not like dumb, driven cattle !  
Be a hero in the strife !

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant !  
Let the dead Past bury its dead !  
Act,– act in the living Present !  
Heart within, and God o'erhead !

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time ;

Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate ;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1838)

