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Silverman, Maxine

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A Parallel Press Chapbook

TRANSPORT OF THE AIM

a garland of poems on the lives of
Emily Dickinson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson,
and Celia Thaxter

BY

Maxine Silverman

Introduction by Judith Farr

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Transport of the Aim

a garland of poems on the lives
of
Emily Dickinson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Celia Thaxter

Poems by Maxine Silverman
with an introduction by Judith Farr

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The title, *Transport of the Aim*, is taken from the last line of
Emily Dickinson's poem Fr. 1109.

I fit for them—
I seek the dark till I am thorough fit.
The labor is a sober one
With this sufficient sweet
That abstinence of mine produce
A purer food for them, if I succeed,
If not I had
The transport of the Aim—

“Emily Was Little, But Oh My” and “Her White Dress” were published
in *The Westchester Review*. Thanks to the editors for permission to
reprint these poems.

to, for, and quite possibly because of

Howard

and for our sons, Jacob and Owen, who cheer me on

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Introduction

With empathy, grace and wit, Maxine Silverman paints a moving portrait of two singular New England women in her *Transport of the Aim*. This long poem, composed of many short ones in varied line lengths with various historic and biographical themes, bears an aesthetic resemblance to the works in collage that Silverman has also devised—as does one of her characters: the writer, socialite and innkeeper Celia Thaxter. *Transport* has clearly been inspired by startling similarities between the life of Thaxter—who often dressed in white and was painted by Childe Hassam standing solitary among her brilliantly colored flowers on the Isle of Shoals—and that of another woman who dressed in white and created a private “Spice Isle” amid the tropic blooms of her conservatory. She is the poet (now an American icon), Emily Dickinson.

Although led within the same Victorian framework and in occasional contact with the same people, the lives of these women were very different. Silverman is alive to the teasing similarities between them, however. Thus, we might expect one poem, “Her White Dress,” to be spoken by Emily, though its longer lines and talk of the sea proclaim Celia. The dress, like the mention of bees, wildflowers and lanterns, relates the women. Yet we never forget that Thaxter was wife, mother, hostess and breadwinner, while the far more exclusive Dickinson married her Muse: her chief entertainment, her demanding master. Glimpsed occasionally by neighbors as she gardened behind a hedge, Emily baked like Celia and, like her, built fires in order to find freedom to seed, read, write. Which woman, one might ask, addressed these words to James Field, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*: “Here are some verses which have . . . evolved . . . among the pots and kettles”? No, it was not Dickinson, though her aprons were made with pockets wherein to slip the poems she began while cooking. Ironically, she addressed the critic T.W Higginson—Thaxter’s mentor—after reading an essay of his in the *Atlantic*. Such coincidences haunt the pages of Silverman’s poem.

But it is their passion for flowers and their horticultural skills that truly link Emily and Celia; Silverman wisely avoids comparing their highly disproportionate poetic gifts. Celia’s labor “knead[ing] in the

flinty soil of her island” she respects, like her visual sensitivity, evident in the charming narrative “An Island Garden.” But Thaxter finally renounces poetry for painting on china, while so faithful to her art was Emily Dickinson that Higginson compares her to Pegasus, leaving thoughts upon the air like terrifying footprints. Silverman’s title comes from Dickinson’s lyric “I fit for them.” There the poet claims that her apparent “abstinence” from ordinary pleasures may provide “a purer food” than bread—the poems!—“if I succeed.” If not, she will have had— again like Thaxter—“the transport of the Aim.”

The allusive atmosphere of Silverman’s poem can be thrilling. Emily Dickinson disliked anything “ostensible,” her brother recalled, and Silverman’s Emily “vanishes” into her “chambers of Sweet Sultan and lilac / where she can unostensibly / be / fragrance.” The real Thaxter never wrote to Dickinson; here, she does—but too late, for the Amherst poet is dead. In a beautiful last lyric “MacGregor Jenkins Sums Up,” the little neighbor boy Emily loved—now grown-up and remembering a moment of “before and after” in his life—gives us her portrait: Emily Dickinson, “Monarch” of art, gazing at a butterfly amid her flowers:

“There she stood
radiant as Christmas among orchis and oleander
where a late celadon chrysalis had grown more
and more translucent, bursting its gold bands.
On warm scented air, the Monarch drifted,

last autumn leaf. ‘Mac, Mac,’ she whispered,
turning slowly with that royal flight, the light
catching her auburn hair, ‘just in time
for his great Migration.’”

Judith Farr
Professor Emerita
Georgetown University

Emily Was Little, but Oh My

Not one to fuss
as other girls
with tussie-mussies,

Emily simply
took on God,

wrestled,
was blessed,
and letting go,
blessed.

She considered lilies
her introduction,

the firmament
her conservatory,

language
the sacrament,

each word a wafer
on her tongue.

Celia's Lantern

1845, White Island

This light is seed
to scatter, sowing
the starless night
for Father rowing.

This seed is light,
tightly furled, a pearl
twining to amethyst
on winter's skirl.

Amherst, Returned from Holyoke

Daisy vies with Eden,
how could she not
when Miss Lyon herself contends,
Would I yield to Christ?
Do I feel concern, a twinge?

Prized specimen in God's Own herbarium
I am pressed,
labeled *unsaved*,
classified *no hope*.

The one thing needful
home secures. Carlo
deems me worthy,
his bark repealing as any steeple bell.

Trespass of hollyhock, feral orange
cat looks back this way feeling Scrutiny,
then, no movement here in the garden,
slinks along the orchard wall.

Is God a voyeur too,
flattening with coincidental gaze?

I shall stare back and hope my poor eyes stand the glare.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson

writing to his wife, Mary, August 16, 1870

“Small like a wren”—indeed.
“Hair like a chestnut burr”—yes.
“Eyes the color of sherry”—perhaps,
difficult to ascertain, she seemed to float
into the room, *materialized* rather,
her light shawl flaring behind.
One eye acknowledged me,
the other looked askance, her angle of vision

resolute if wayward, rather let me say—incorrigible
and, I begin to suspect, both singular
and absolute.

Back in my room at The Amherst, what I recall,
am struck by, how fiercely fragile, skittish,
as if I should breach some perilous etiquette
if straightaway I addressed her or broached
any common subject uncircuitously,
how easily spooked.
Remember your uncle’s Indian mare
that even still barely tolerates a bridle,
the bit foam-flecked
when pulled from her mouth?

My dear, I must check the glass.
Are there hoof prints on my brow?

Celia in Her Kitchen

Newtonville, Massachusetts

Ah. I see. Wentworth returns.
My husband's Harvard roommate
thinks my home his lodgings
to reserve for spring and summer
breakdowns, my rooming house
for the over bred, over fed, over wrought.

Like Bruriah, I sweep around the scholars,
bring their chops and *blanc mange*.
Like Cinderella, I remain cheerful
until I hear them laughing
over cigars, the party regaled
with anecdotes from Amherst,

an introduction of lilies,
her left eye drifting to the evergreen hedge,
sotto voce spinster dashing off "verse"

and away from here,
what does he say of mine?

In Company

Emily

Will this house, porous
brick with skin-thick
ocher pigment, breathe?
Does breath drawn
expire here—can Bees
find their clover—Phlox
thrive here in *transitus*,
or Father's flocks over
there in new meadows?
Shall bread rise? These
stir in corners as I enter
rooms adorned with
silence. Home is slue.
Dare I cross the lawn
to Austin and Sue's
fawn-colored house?
Mr. Thaxter comes
to College Hall to
tell us all he knows
of Browning. Will he
cite Sonnets or other
news of *her*? I could

Celia

Away with the brooms and dust cloth,
be gone wash board and scour pots,
with Levi gone on tour the birds sing
anthems to me and the children. We
will play in the garden this afternoon!
skip laughing to milk Maude! Tomorrow,
loveliest of words, we cross the Bay to
Mother. And who, my boys or I, will
dream more roses only the angels can
foretell. Oh, then Tuesday I take the coach
to South Berwick by tea time to visit
Miss Jewett and her sisters. Maybe Mr.
Emerson will come again from Boston,
Mr. Lowell or James and Annie Fields
(Their Saturday at homes on Charles Street
beguile memory!). Surely they will invite
me to visit them a week, perhaps to attend
the Peace Jubilee. Boston! Portsmouth
seems almost dowdy. Dear, to be sure, but
poky. Wentworth assured me in his
Easter letter the Fields had remarked
favorably to him on my singing. Or,
of course, I can easily invite them to
Appledore for summer solstice. Should I
bring them wild flowers or sweet peonies?
Mr. Whittier did praise their fragrance
though peonies mightn't last till then. Oh,
someone will play piano, someone will
comment on my poems, and someone
describe his passage from the Continent.
How I yearn for the horn to sound *Ceelia*,
to see the Loire Valley and the Pyrenees,

wait till Hall's dark.
No lamps dim
at Sue's. People
speak alarms.
Carlo and I sight

an open sash,
pollen dusting

I dare the Dark
to taste the Light,
a Nectar few
deem Sweet
plumb the Mine
—a yellow bird—
prove Thine air
to Thee. See
New Englandly.

though I feel mighty sure no view exceeds
New Hampshire's crags for Awe. And
Rome and Florence—or Fez! Mother and
Oscar are kind to keep my boys while I
catch a breath. Winter seemed greyer
colder longer this year, a season-long
scarrow, yet spring did finally arrive, as it
always does, just when I think it never will,
that this will be the year the ice melts just
enough we daren't skate across to Mother
only to freeze again 'til we declare The Pole
has staked a flag, laying claim to all in the
name of Queen Artica. Enough enough
of fear, my morbidity (so Levi says). Boys,
boys! Lively now—Maudie calls, can you
not hear? Only tomorrow! We sail to the
welcoming gulls and valiant osprey! Dear
granite scart with your billowing lacy sea-
skirt, scarry island waiting for me to row
bloom and blossom—and row I shall if I
must—Purple Scarlet Pearl and Opal Fire
to the storm-weary lighthouse, the hotel
(off with her shutters out with all shut-
ins), my Appledore! At the first stretch of
rosy dawn we sail to heaven's Gate, then
Heaven Herself! Jubilation!

Spice Isles

Jessamine and oleander—
Emily transports Tropics
to her Conservatory,
fending off winter.

Flagstones run beneath snow's dazzle
to Equinox and April's yeast, a path
through succession of scent and savor,
aisles of sweet blossoming trees,

arbors thatched with *Bon Silene*
and Cinnamon rose—

she vanishes

should carriage pause *Emilieeee!*

chambers of Sweet Sultan and lilac
where she can unobstensibly
be

fragrance,

her sanctuary within sanction,
keep of her *exquisite containment*

evanescence

Her Island Garden

A winter's worth of eggshells,
swaddled in sea moss and cotton batting,
each half shell a cradle for seedlings,
marigolds, balsam, and snowdrops,
rocking in the skiff,

a votive craft Celia thought her cargo
(all year rinsing albumen from the shells,
tipping them to dry, then serried in the root cellar,
her breath rising as she counted down
the frost rimmed shelf),

thread bare dishcloths put by since September
when she put the garden to bed,
rags stained by curse-blood, scrubbed
for binding blistered palms and swaddling her knees in June,

and buckets of dark loamy compost, clang clanging
when she comes about, to knead in the flinty soil
of her island garden.

*Soon the whole plot mantles over all its surface with the rich, warm
green of vigorous leafage. The new growth rejoices . . . the right word.
The gladness of green growing things is apparent.*

2 a.m., plink plink plink—not berries *du jour*.
Plaguesome slugs Celia plucked from the poppies, her poppies,
love-in-a-mist, coreopsis and pinks, akebia vine, wisteria, hops,
her sweet peas, foxglove and phlox, dahlias, hollyhocks,
zinnias (Augustolia, Cut and Come Again), her cosmos.

*The Norwegians have a pretty and significant word, “opelske,”
which they use in speaking of the care of flowers. It means literally
“loving up,” or cherishing them into health and vigor.*

October. Seeds sorted, labeled, packed with camphor
to ward off marauding rats.

November. Mosaic of crushed eggshells and mulch.

Childe's Appledore, color sketches.

Winter's vigorish.

Sighting Emily

Earthshine, Professor Todd wrote,
illuminates the dark part
of the moon's disk, faintly.

He trained his telescope skyward
for comet or star, then back to earth.
The astronomer could not believe his luck.
Miss Emily, rarely seen, emerged
to the east, yellow apron over pale dress,
and ducked into her garden,

and just then—the luminous Mabel,
his own wife, ascended
the Dickinson's front steps,
knocked, entered,

while tucking a gold watch
in his red vest pocket, Austin Dickinson
crossed from his mansion next door
to his sisters' kitchen. Austin—
Squire's heir, College trustee,
cultivator of specimen trees
robbed from Amherst woods
and the flaming azalea
Cuckoldrum flagrantii.

Thereafter, Professor Todd
became a world-renowned expert
on the solar eclipse.

After the Storm

an almost found poem from *An Island Garden*

Bird peep, my precious moment to steal
away from keeping house and guests,
to gather the ascending day after a long night's storm.

Prostrate on the slopes, wind flogged,
scarlet white azure crimson orange,
leaves and stalks snarled as sea weed.

Foothold here, here, through the confusion
I made a way, stooping for tempest-spared buds,
every unfolded cup star bell, when there, by the gate
I was struck, as if by a lingering bolt. Clinging to the stem
of a Poppy's green seed-pod, drenched, eyes mere slits
in his dear face, wiry claws clasped, rigid with cold,

my hummingbird, tamest of the flock that haunts
the seaside garden. Shifting flowers in a glowing heap
to my left arm, I took the sodden mite in my right palm,
and pulled firmly steadily tenderly to disengage him.
Careful not to mash or even press his perishing body,
I breathed into my palm's hollow.

So many tasks, I could not spare myself to nurse him,
but kept him bosom high. Ten, twenty breaths
on the path home. More warm breath
as singlehanded I set cutlery by ironstone plates,
folded napkins, instructed Cook.

Cotton wool I put into a shallow basket of yellow straw,
periwinkle shell of water honey-thickened, the wee bird—
fluttering pulse, wings astir. Now sun was pouring warm light
into the garden. Where heavenly blue larkspurs stand,
behind snow-white lilies, I hung the pretty cradle. A breeze,
balmy after the storm, rocked the tall flowers, the basket swayed.

I worked on—juice pitcher and tumblers, vase on each table—
checking to see how he got on. Ever so solemn he looked about
his beak opened, and closed. Suddenly he rose, emerald spark
quivering among blue flowers, plunging blossom after blossom
for his own morning repast. Oh my heart, my heart implores
why? if the hummingbird revives, coaxed back on my very breath,

why can I not restore Karl, my first born, to a strapping self, and all
of us to our lives? Karl, poor Karl—his fits convulse the island. Mind
he doesn't spit milk, stir a fire! The moment he wakes: Karly, mustn't
kick Johnny, shriek, curse, trammel larks or larkspurs. Fever-vigilant,
I tend, soothe. Will he fend for himself—ever? Karl my boy, my own
Karly! Now, now, Mama's here. There there.

Lost Roses

Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee writing to her husband

You will find me altered as well, Robert,
bent, more than a tad, borne or wheeled about, my hands
no more than blain-red knobs. Gloves—

you finding my kidskin somehow on the path that night,
a Grand March (your gloved palm and mine), quadrille, a reel,
you offering me the bud of Old Blush,
you kissing my hand through openwork of summer mitts,
you and you and you

~~~~

What with battles won, lost, your boys, Caroline's boy  
captured at Hoke's Run and held we know not where  
(She hates to burden you, but with Abel gone . . .),  
has this intelligence reached you? Arlington House  
conscripted, confiscated for burial ground, their graves strewn  
hither, yon among my Tea-scented and Crimson, Safonia,  
Old Blush, Parson's Pink. To think—roses, and blue caps  
hung off grave markers lashed from our own fence rails,  
my greenhouse in smithereens, so our people say—  
of them only William ran off, old Sam killed, and Tansy's Nan  
unaccounted for in all that has come to pass.

~~~~

A mercy—Lot's wife turned to salt.

After Their Mother Died

Setting plates, Lavinia counts but two,
two pewter forks, spoons,
two tumblers by blade tips of two knives.
Emily slides the cut glass vase,
a chorus of ruby lilies,
from table center to the foot,
to obscure the Absence seated there.

Full-throated lilies giving voice
to the shimmering white expanse
between them,

the sisters take their places,
shy as guests at the familiar table,
now theirs, and one must ask
how the other slept.

*I dreamed
Dark thick as the 9th plague—*

answering, “Well enough, and you?”

Silence imminent,
hushed scent of lilies
twining with a rush of perfume
from the Conservatory, gardenias,
and heliotrope most sumptuous
just before they wither.

What lay ahead but more
of the same only more so?

Kittens tussling, Maggie clanging
a cast iron lid hard on its pan,

and Austin enters—

his sisters' spirits rise
to greet him. Mother and Father—
simply away, and Austin's home on the sly
from Boston, a forbidden book in the pocket
of his yellow trousers.

Her White Dress

a painting of Celia Thaxter by Childe Hassam

Childe's idea—portraits of my salon to represent my self—fascinating!

How his quick strokes echo my desire, plump arm chairs for unhurried
têt-à-tête, gold-rimmed vases brimming on hemstitched linen, the open
baby grand. Then pastel sketches of my island garden, I, shimmering
white dress at twilight, my gown luminous among Scotch roses
and crimson phlox, white among fiery poppies, light blossoming

in middle ground before a ruffled sky. Of sky, a mauve wash
of kittiwakes and loons, he caught a likeness. Now Childe frets,
moves his easel near cliffs breaching the waves, mixes fresh color,
how to paint the *rote*, that constant sougning on the rugged shore,
how to show the sea's voice—and not just the sea's. From away,
Childe must learn to hear the notes below gulls' keening and cold

froth against bedrock, the chord under clamoring years, below patina
or personage of white frock and shawl, *continuo* of granite tide and time.
Here I am Celiq, Mother's skellig girl of Shoals. Here each island sounds
a signature tone one may steer by. The native ear is a keen fog auger.
“Hog Island's crying,” they report from Star of the tree lorn rock renamed
Appledore.

More, Only More So

Midnight, her fire banked,
she misses Carlo at her feet, numb,
ink near clotted in the well,
her pen ranging West of Domingo.

From the barn after milking, Tom
passes Maggie on her way to the hens.
“Maggie girl, y’sister wants us
Sunday after church.”

“Aye, Tom,
sure’n they spare me.”

On one line *Countenance* *Yolk*
then *the Veil morning lifted*

lifted struck through In the margin
and reinserted
 Quaben *diadem*

It’s the wanting she wants,
the heart tugging at her moor line,
slipping the cleat knot, running
wing and wing with the wind

To Fanny and Loo from Emily, 1869

After four years Mrs. Stearns' awe
at Death's democracy is unabated.
Remember! is not so much testament
as test of our colors.

Springfield pens: Generals Order "Fire!"
at Boston's Peace Jubilee.

Cannonade
rends the air though civility prefers muscat.
Lemonade is served in wild buttercups.

Here, from the garden, flags
for the little cousins and bunting
with hope her song warms them
mid the *mêlée*.

An Exchange

27 February, 1886

Dear Miss Dickinson,

Please forgive if I intrude.

Our mutual friend, Colonel Higginson, gave me your address and leave to write to you. Often he has described your fine garden, scents and colors equally vivid, so I now venture to ask if you would be so kind to send some of your lilies for mine.

I have no conservatory and Appledore's growing season is brief, still I think lilies might thrive here.

Enclosed are seeds of showy stonecrop whose form and seed pods might be the armature for your winter garden, as mine.

Thanking you, I am very truly yours,

(Mrs.) Celia Loughton Thaxter

25 September, 1886

Dear Mrs. Thaxter,

Be assured you do not intrude, but I regret to inform you that my sister died in May, on the 15th. Our grief has known no words and even today my pen stutters on the page.

With respect for Emily's ever kind friend,
I send bulbs as you requested,
her favorite, the cow lily, often called tawny
daylily or August lily for when it blooms.
So weak, she could no longer write herself,
Emily dictated instructions, also enclosed,
for their cultivation.

Very truly yours,

Lavinia Norcross Dickinson

“Land-locked”

At last she confessed
words failed her, poetry
her garden's parergon, not her life's work.
Celia's *magnum opus*—her island garden
where dirt, hours and days of dirt
under her fingernails, crusted in heart
line and life line—this solitude saved her

from lonely clatter, clutter, and Levi's brooding silence.
To sit still, in the dark, when the boys finally slept,
left palm holding blank paper, ink drying and clotting
her pen, all the lamps snuffed save this small one,
marooned her as the sea did not.

~~~

Wintering in Portsmouth, Celia paints peonies and delphinium,  
billows of them on china tiles, pimpernel on porcelain cups,  
saucers, bowls, olive branches on crockery jugs. Signs and dates  
each gravy boat or tea set, ships them all to Boston for firing.  
Celia paces like a captain's wife till her wares safely back. Totes  
up sales to dearest half penny, sets aside in thick brown envelopes,  
so much for provender and provisions, taxes and tonic, fares and frolic.

~~~

Celia arranges the tray, the cozy, sugar and cream, laughter
and conversation—ideas her idea of a keeping room.

Not, she hastens to say, that she scorns a mere parlor, no,

at the lighthouse Celia and her younger brothers would wait
for Father to return from trimming the lamp, a friendly game
of checkers, then up the metal stairs to her comforted bed.
But Father died, Mother died, Cedric and Oscar are taller now

than she who seeks and is sought after in even measure. A salon,
a *soirée*, a vase of hydrangea on the credenza, another on the piano,
the music of silver spoons coming to rest by *demitasse*,

the men returned from their cigars, rosy with port, joining the women,
one not deferring to another. Brilliance, filling the sconces, spills over.

Chapters, Verse

1. Fair Copy

Harriet Graves lasted only five months
copying by hand close to 180 poems.
Her head hurt and her hand shook
with their ferocious energy—
awe and ecstasy exploding
in dashes on the page. If Harriet held
her head in her hands no longer could
she grasp right wrist with left hand.
As if she could still hold a pen.

2. Variorum

On the stiff-fangled keys of a Hammond
World “1,” Mabel Loomis Todd typed
transcriptions of the poems Harriet
did her best to decipher. The “1,”

having only upper case letters,
the printer assumed which words
should bear initial capitals when line
breaks were set in type.

3. Susan Gilbert Dickinson

My versions of Emily’s verse are older
than she who would not know *verso* from *folio*,
nor alabaster chamber from a chamber pot,
did not know Emily let alone Emilie and Susie,
who on Pleasant steps sat to tell their hearts,
nor “Amherst,” so how could she know “Daisy”
or “Wife?” She may know my husband.

4. *Poems* by Emily Dickinson

with introduction by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

Beginning at her crown,
scalp rolled
like hooked rug for beating
on the line, a hasp of flesh

their scalpel left behind,
rasp of surgery's blade,
and the top of her skull lifted
("Is there another way?")
the lobes scooped out,
iced, probed to reveal
what, living, she steadfastly
would not. Autopsy
of all she chose not to auction.

Celia Decries Bird Hats and Other Fashions of the Times

Surrender your guns! Burn Harper's *Bazaar*! Sew buttons
on winter coats or embroider buntings for newborns! Robin,
Clapper Rail, Spoonbill, Sandpiper or Dove—all Mourning.
Meadowlark, Pearl Grebe, or Kittiwake trimmed with a Nest
of darling Eggs, Iris, Swallowtail, Monarch—Mourning, all.

Had milliners ever lived outside the confines of mills
as children, roamed hills or beaches, conversed with
fellow creatures, storms, wild violets, could they stitch
replicas of Creation for bizarre fashion promenades?
I think not hope not pray not will not abide any more.

Had they any notion of the value of a bird's life to the bird,
no lady, nay, no woman, could want a bonnet bedecked
with rare plumage or *aigrettes*, tail feathers of Snow Egret,
monstrous hats of Saw-whet's head *à la* Pheasant's wing
and no mother could wear another mother's chick.

And had they not been tutored by their father to think
shooting birds in the name of taxidermy in the name
of science a worthy endeavor, my boys would not run
home as cats to drop their bloody prize at my feet,
expecting praise.

The Dean of American Letters

William Dean Howells to Henry Mills Alden, December, 1890

I hasten to write lest you blame Clemens or the scintillation of 148 Charles Street for my failure to finish "Editor's Study." Rather, the *Poems'* authentic utterance arrests one and I find myself returning again and again to her darkling presence,

the undercurrent of each compassed whole. Miss Dickinson could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity. Alden, I hesitate to declare my remarks sufficient, seal them (The poet's wit would certainly find pithy reference to death

in my waxed envelope!), and dash for the five o'clock post. The *singular worth* of such poems bids me take care, terribly unsparing they are, true as the grave, certain as mortality. There is a still, solemn, rapt movement of thought and music

which I wish to convey to our readers, to tell them If nothing else had come out of our life but this poetry, in Dickinson America has writ her signature bold. Indeed, *Harper's* must give notice that her poetry is as *characteristic of our life as*

our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism, ev'ry schismaticism. And that, sir, say what they will, is realism. "Listen" her poems insist. I mean to hear—as much tho' not as soon—as possible. Until then, forgive the delay, I beg you.

Boston to South Berwick

Annie Adams Fields to Sarah Orne Jewett

7 April, 1891

Sarah, darling Pinny,
Essential news only—Celia left yesterday for Appledore. A choppy sail, doubtless, yet she insisted preparations for summer must commence now. She is drawn, tires easily, not herself. Please write her and ask, as I have, that she take care. The hotel guests weigh on her already and the season a month away! And, Sarah, she must paint so many cups, so many saucers, endorse first Mr. Hall's type writer and then those little cigars—all to pay for Karl and the new roof. But will not be patronized nor pitied, even if one were inclined. Our Celia remains gallant as the skiff bearing her to the Shoals.

So she will not attend the Women's Club tho' I count on your return. Wentworth has arranged for Mrs. Todd, his co-editor of that odd Miss Dickinson's odd poems, to speak on their work. No excuses, dear, there is more, but I want this to reach you post haste with a kiss from your own, A.

A Reply, South Berwick to Boston

Sarah Orne Jewett to Annie Adams Fields

14 April, 1891

Annie, dear Fuff,

One kiss only? I did write our Sandpiper
who is both gumptious and resolute.

As to the poet recluse, I admit curiosity.
For one utter wed to her father's house,
her poems seem unmoored.

Tuesday's noon train and then a hansom
to you, in time for tea. Till then, love, Pin

Walt Whitman's Bedside Table

Ten copies or more, her Poems stacked, equal my *Leaves of Grass*.
Fellow traveler, co-conspirator, double agent, daredevil! I hail her
whose compact astringent lines pack commensurate heft to mine,
and more grace.

Stout boots we laced, setting off toward wide horizons east and west,
Equator, Pole, I with whirring lasso and spurs, she her origami, I by
roaming, she encompassing, I nursing my muse, she nurturing hers,
both gathering, both sewing. Coming home, we mucked out our Fathers'
barn, yes, we mucked about together. Spinster Queen
and Queer, we birthed gravity fields and orbits, heavenly bodies, a new
universe.

& lamblasted the old canon. O say can you see, can you hear? Who shall
deny us? Stand with us, little brothers! Lock arms, young sisters! March
on, strike out on your own, stake your claim. If you prefer, if you must,
step in our seven-league tracks. Here, my darlings—your rucksack.
Fill it with provisions, provender, *Poems, Leaves of Grass*. Whatever
you need—borrow—whatever is needed—lend. Leave us in the dust,
Beautiful Ones, but oh, do not forget us. Circle back! All for all, free-for-
all you are worth, sing for us, whistle, dance on her green-sweet grave,
serenade beneath my window, a most disgraceful shindig, my lovey doves,
a shivaree.

**Wentworth Higginson Teaches His Young Wife
and Daughter To Play “Authors”**

The rules are simple as rummy. Watch now.
Each player receives thirteen cards.
Four of a kind make a “book,”
four Shakespeare, four Dante,
Tennyson, Thaxter, Twain and so on.

Draw and discard the author who does not fit
your hand. I may take your discard or draw one,
then discard, and so on until one of us has four books.
Ready?

 Minnie, I tell you I am weary
of travel, of lecturing, found myself wordless
at Mrs. Fields’ last evening, I—

how long ago Amherst seems,
and our Celia! No island this summer, no sea

Would you deal the next round, my dear,
while I stir the fire?

Mark Twain Returns to Appledore

From away, I stood in line for local color,
heard gulls and osprey spread the news
we had come about.

Celia made her way to welcome us,
down steps hewn from granite cliffs
rising from the quicksilver sea.

“Cup your hands, Mr. Clemens!”
and from her apron poured blueberries
I gulped down as if I’d staggered
to some Gobi oasis, their wild sweetness
smearing my moustache. To this day

her laughter flings open summer’s gate—
and my teeth stained blue til supper
when Celia, laughing, served us pie.

For the Record, Margaret Maher

Miss Vinnie claimed her sister
the only one among them *had to think*.
I say what she thought about
bound Miss Em'ly home: Eternity
whelmed her. Eternity
left her breathless.

Any who say contrary was not there.

She set the bread to rise for her Father
would eat none other, and testing oven's heat
herself, spared m' hand. Laundry fell to me—
their whites to soak a night before;
scour the whites, coarse whites, flannels,
the colors; water enough for wash, rinse,
blueing, the starch; tubs for all that lot; wood
enough to keep a boil. Not to scorch the clothes
I dashed them with a rod thicker'n a churn's.

How she startled up from skimming milk,
flew where I ironed. "Oh Maggie, don't ye see?"
She feared her thoughts "Idolatrous"—her Eye ingenious
as the bee's, sure'n Hands that cunning at a tinderbox.
But close them? Should a bee not take the pollen,
could it not? Eyes sealed, she would be seeing still.

I found her. Third step from the landing, and hie'd
the others. Light as your very breath she was by then,
we carried our Em'ly up to bed, watched by turns,
till on to Judge Lord she went.

Her hand-stitched Books—not them for the burning,
Sheaves—m' apron full—'tis herself, I said, but aye—
look what was done to the work of her Hand.

Them herself folded so, a napkin by m' plate
(merry she was in her way), or them she tucked
in m' apron waist—Mine, and still Mine.

Any who say contrary can ask in their Time.

Annie Fields Surveys the Damage

I buried Jamie in '81, Celia in '94,
Sarah in ought nine, now Celia's parlor
and garden gone to ash
and the ash to wind.

How much more can be borne
I do not want to know.

Willa Cather

Our boys return from France
wracked with choke-hold coughing
that cracks their ribs.

That card game we played back home
in Red Cloud, Miss Jewett and Mrs. Thaxter
among the Authors—I, too, would write.

Mabel on Appledore

40-odd fascicles—transcribing—
two slim volumes—and many lectures,
I became Emily's agent, you see,
her effulgent medium.

Then a book of her letters and a third
of verse. In between, my dear, I sailed
with David to Japan. He designed telescopes
for tracking the Transit of Venus. I climbed
Mt. Fuji (the first Western woman, I might add,
to do so), kept my life list, sketched some,
played Schubert, composed myself.

Thick as Devon cream, they dashed to Appledore—
this bleak and bleached island I now call home—
to play and paint the summers away, write and talk,
and oh, in that rich intercourse my sustenance.

Time has rubbed my teal green silk to nubs.
This new century does not become me.
My dearest gone,
and David in the asylum weeping.

MacGregor Jenkins Sums Up

Even when she no longer joined our games,
Gib and Neddy's aunt would lean out
her window, lower baskets of gingerbread.

Every year Ned won the Botany Prize. Again,
his Aunt Emily. Their garden tutored him,
her schoolgirl herbarium, and the Tropics—so
she called a conservatory the Squire gave her

to stave off winter. One fierce December (that fall
Gib had died) I was walking past the Homestead.
Miss Emily sent Vinnie dashing for me. "Summoned"
is the word—to the conservatory. There she stood

radiant as Christmas among orchis and oleander
where a late celadon chrysalis had grown more
and more translucent, bursting its gold bands.
On warm scented air, the Monarch drifted,

last autumn leaf. "Mac, Mac," she whispered,
turning slowly with that royal flight, the light
catching her auburn hair, "just in time
for his great Migration."

In my life, there have been three events, the War,
the birth of my daughter, that butterfly.
Everything else is *before or after*.

Author's Notes

"In Company": In *transitus* is discussed in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* by Judith Farr.

"Her Island Garden": Italicized lines are quoted from *An Island Garden* by Celia Thaxter.

"After the Storm": "Bird peep" is Isles of Shoals vernacular for "dawn."

"To Fanny and Loo from Emily, 1869": Fanny and Loo were Emily's "little cousins," Frances and Louise Norcross. Frazer Sterns, a local Amherst boy, was killed in the Civil War. "Springfield" refers to *The Springfield Republican* and one of Emily's nicknames for its editor, Samuel Bowles.

"More Only More So": Quaben was a Native American chief whose ghost, so local legend claimed, could be seen in the Amherst area long after the rest of the tribe had been banished.

"Land-locked": Thaxter's first published poem appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1860.

"The Dean of American Letters": Italicized lines are quoted from Howells' review in *Harper's Magazine* (January 1891) of *Poems by Emily Dickinson*.

"Boston to South Berwick" and "A Reply, South Berick to Boston": These friends bestowed nicknames on one another. Annie Fields was called "Fuff" by Sarah Orne Jewett and "Annie Meadows" by friends who would not otherwise have used her first name. Jewett was called "Pinny" by Fields and "Owl" by Celia Thaxter. Thaxter was "Sandpiper," the title of one of her most anthologized poems.

Celia Thaxter endorsed various products including the Hall Type Writer and cigars, using her celebrity to supplement income from writing, china painting, and managing Appledore House.

“Wentworth Higginson Teaches . . . Authors”: Authors was a 19th century parlor card game. Celia Thaxter was so popular in her day that her picture appeared on an 1890 deck with Shakespeare, Dante, Tennyson, Hawthorne and Twain. As reading tastes changed, particular authors were added or deleted from the deck. Thaxter was removed from the game around 1920. Dickinson, of course, was not in the original deck of Authors due to her anonymity, but is included in a recent version with writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Carson McCullers.

“Mark Twain Returns to Appledore”: “From away” is Maine vernacular for everywhere else.

“Annie Fields Surveys the Damage”: In 1914, a fire destroyed Appledore House, Thaxter’s cottage, and her garden.

“MacGregor Jenkins Sums Up”: MacGregor Jenkins, son of the Dickinson family’s Congregationalist minister, lived across the street from The Homestead.

Biographical Notes

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)—poet whose posthumously published work is a landmark in the history of American literature, sometimes referred to herself as “Daisy” or “Amherst”

William Austin Dickinson (1829–1895)—Emily’s older brother, known as Austin

Lavinia Norcross Dickinson (1833–1899)—Emily’s younger sister who persevered in having the poetry published after Emily’s death

Susan Gilbert Dickinson (1830–1913)—Emily’s girlhood friend, lifelong reader of ED’s poems, Austin’s wife, mother of Ned, Martha and Gilbert (“Gib”)

Margaret “Maggie” Maher (1841–1924)—Irish domestic servant in the Dickinson household for thirty years (1869–1899); may have stored some of Emily’s poems in her trunk.

Tom Kelley (1833–1920)—Maggie’s brother-in-law; as Emily wished, Tom and five other hired men carried her coffin out The Homestead’s back door through the orchard to West Cemetery

Carlo—Emily’s large dog, given to her for companionship and protection by her father

Judge Otis Lord (1812–1884)—twenty years Emily’s senior, her suitor toward the end of her life

David Peck Todd (1855–1939)—astronomy professor at Amherst College

Mabel Loomis Todd (1856–1932)—David’s wife; Austin’s mistress; editor (with TWH) of ED’s poems and letters; first to refer to ED’s hand-sewn manuscripts as “fascicles”

Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911)—literary arbiter and lecturer; Emily’s “mentor” who advised her not to publish; (with MLT) first editor of Emily’s posthumous poetry; social activist; friend and Harvard roommate of Celia’s Thaxter’s husband; known to friends as Wentworth

Celia Laighton Thaxter (1835–1894)—celebrated American poet, now known chiefly for *An Island Garden*; daughter of Eliza and Thomas Laighton who was lighthouse keeper on White Island (one of the Isles of Shoals off the coast of Maine and New Hampshire) where Celia spent her childhood; co-owner with her brothers of Appledore House, hotel where artists, writers, musicians, politicians and other public figures vacationed in summer

Levi Lincoln Thaxter (1824–1884)—Celia’s tutor, business partner of her father, and later her husband; toured as a Robert Browning scholar and lecturer

Childe Hassam (1859–1935)—American impressionist painter; Celia’s friend and illustrator of her book, *An Island Garden*

James Fields (1817–1881)—co-founder of Ticknor & Fields, publisher of many leading writers; host of literary salon at 148 Charles Street in Boston

Annie Adams Fields (1834–1915)—second wife of James Fields; author; philanthropist; Celia’s closest female friend.

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909)—novelist and short story writer best known for *Country of the Pointed Firs* and other fiction set along the southern coast of Maine

William Dean Howells (1837–1920)—novelist; editor of *Atlantic Monthly*; called the Dean of American Letters



Maxine Silverman's poetry and essays have been published in many journals, anthologies, and *Enskymment: Online Archive of American Poetry*. Recipient of a Pushcart Prize, she is the author of three previous chapbooks: *Survival Song* (Sunbury Press); *Red Delicious* published in *Desire Path*, the inaugural volume of the Quartet Series from Toadlily Press; and *52 Ways of Looking*. In addition to poetry, she creates collage, bricolage, and visual midrash. A native of Sedalia, MO, she now lives with her family in one of the river villages of the Hudson Valley. Her website is www.maxinegilverman.com.

Judith Farr is the author of three books about Emily Dickinson. *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the year (1992). *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* won the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize of the British Academy (2005). A novel, *I Never Came to You in White*, imagines Dickinson's school years and was translated into Spanish and Portuguese. She lectures widely on the importance of art and gardening in Dickinson's poems and letters.

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