

# Poems and Letters by Emily Dickinson to Sue Gilbert

*Queering the History of Emotions, Spring 2018*



Excerpt from Martha Nell Smith's "Susan & Emily Dickinson: Their Lives in Letters"

During the first century of public distribution of her literary work, many facts about Emily Dickinson's writing practices and about her decades-long alliance with her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, have become clearer. As her poems moved from manuscript and hand circulation to printed volumes and various editions, tools such as Thomas H. Johnson's variorum *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), his three-volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958), Jay Leyda's two-volume *House of Emily Dickinson* (1960), R. W. Franklin's two-volume *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), and his three-volume variorum *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) have proved indispensable for Dickinson scholars. Yet the facts about Susan and Emily Dickinson's relationship recounted in the following paragraph lack what Susan and Emily called "phosphorescence" and Percy Bysshe Shelley called the "uncommunicated lightning" of mind in his introduction to *Prometheus Unbound*. Echoing Shelley, Emily remarked to Susan that some had "the Facts but not the Phosphorescence," or understanding, "of Knowledge" ("Notes Toward a Volume of ED's Writing," *WSD*). All of the above lack understanding of Susan and Emily Dickinson's relationship because the facts they convey about it have neither been adequately interrogated nor read in a framework making clear their profound significance for understanding Dickinson's poetic project. These perplexities in interpretation are perhaps inevitable in a culture with a limited (and heterosexualized) range of storylines for scripting poetic influence and erotic devotions. This essay will review those facts, analyze the history of their "lives" in Dickinson study, and will conclude discussing the importance of recovering the biography of this relationship for understanding Emily Dickinson's writing practices. Born nine days after Emily Dickinson on December 19, 1830, about ten miles away from Amherst in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, and dying May 12, 1913, almost twenty-seven years to the day after Emily, Susan and Emily have been called "nearly twins" by some (Mudge 93), and indeed they enjoyed many mutual passions—for literature, especially poetry, and for gardening, recipes, music, nature.

Here are a few facts about Emily Dickinson, her writing practices, and her relationship with Susan: Emily sent Susan substantially more writings than were addressed to any other (more than twice the number than to her next most frequently addressed correspondent, Thomas Wentworth Higginson), and these nearly 500 writings constitute one of two major corpora that Dickinson bequeathed to the world at her death (the other being the more than 800 poems in the fascicles). The number of texts alone testify that Susan was Emily's most trusted reader and critic, and the record shows that the two engaged in a literary dialogue that lasted for decades, and the better part of Dickinson's life. Correspondents for nearly forty years and next door neighbors for three decades, their relationship was constant, from the time they were girls together until Emily's death in 1886. Emily and Susan began writing one another when they were in their late teens, perhaps earlier. Their mutual passions, especially for literature, were well-known to their contemporaries, and at least one—their mutual friend, editor Samuel Bowles, in an 1862 letter to Susan—acknowledged their writing together. As Emily writes more and more to Susan, poetry emerges in, within, and from the epistolary scriptures, and as Emily writes more and more poems to Susan, the lyrics become more and more bold in theme, imagery, form. Material evidence in Susan's papers shows that Emily was sending Susan pencilled, or what appear to be draft,

versions of poems that she would record in her manuscript books, or “fascicles,” in ink. This is especially significant since critics, editors, and biographers have long believed that Emily did not share drafts of her poems with any other contemporary. Other material evidence in Susan’s papers and in the writings to her husband, Emily’s brother Austin, shows that someone sought to expunge affectionate expressions by Emily to and about Sue. As readers will see, Mabel Loomis Todd, one of the first two editors producing volumes of Dickinson’s poems, wanted to obfuscate the centrality of Susan’s roles in Emily’s writing processes, and went to great lengths to suppress any trace of Susan as literary collaborator and confidante.

However, though noticed in biographies by mention and in editions by tabulation, all these facts have remained dispersed and scattered, and thus generally uninterpreted. In other words, the story these facts tell has, until recently, not been uttered. Simply and succinctly put, these facts show that as most beloved friend, influence, muse, and advisor whose editorial suggestions Dickinson sometimes followed, Susan played a primary role in Emily’s creative processes. For more than a century, others have tried to hide Susan’s role as Emily’s literary confidante.

Facts about the relationship’s constancy and longevity were well-known to their contemporaries, but they have been passed along to posterity through a variety of testimonies, two of which are the central players in determining the relationship’s reception. Closest to the source of any and all is Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Susan’s daughter and Emily’s niece, who has generally (and unfairly) been received as nearly always unreliable. The other key source is one who knew the relationship only from a distance. Though received by many as objective, this source could not possibly be so, having been from the perspective of Susan’s husband’s mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd. In the course of her affair with Emily’s brother Austin, Loomis Todd served as editor of the first three volumes of Emily’s poems. So while editing Susan’s best friend’s poems, she played satisfying mistress to Susan’s disappointing wife. Not surprisingly, then, the story about Susan’s role in Emily Dickinson’s writing life has never been uttered in a full, coherent narrative, but has only been relayed in competing versions, and partially, with many key facts hidden or trivialized.

Other key facts about the writings of this relationship have been available but have either gone unnoticed or have not been analyzed for their significance, even by those who have access to them. In effect, these facts have been privatized, reserved for editors and scholars engaged in manuscript study. Indeed, these facts underscore the significance of Emily pencilling versions of poems sent to Susan in a “rough draft” or more casual hand, while she recorded versions of those poems in the fascicles in her “performance” or finalized “script” (*Rowing in Eden*, 62-63). Indeed, what is signaled by the fact that Emily wrote Susan in pencil while she almost always wrote all others in the more formal medium of ink. And what is signaled by the fact that Emily wrote on diverse types of paper to Susan (graph, scrap, and formal embossed paper of all sizes) while with other correspondents she almost always used more formal, often gilt-trimmed stationery, in effect dressing her texts like a gift edition of poetry or a deluxe edition of biblical scripture. The profound cumulative effects of these facts that seem negligible in isolation from one another have remained obscure, lying dormant as “undiscovered public knowledge.” Like “scattered pieces of a puzzle” this knowledge has lain in scholarly books and articles and in manuscript collections but remained “unknown because ‘its logically related parts. . . have never become to known to any one person’” who could then transmit that knowledge to the public

(Love 9). Even as attention to Dickinson's manuscripts has increased exponentially in this decade's turn toward the twenty-first century (witnessed by the fact that so many books of Dickinson criticism published in the 1990s feature some facsimile image of her scripture on their covers), the prevailing assumption has been that any knowledge discovered through analyses of the original documents is of primary interest to specialists. The meanings of facts regarding the materiality of Dickinson's manuscripts for literary history and for understanding the poet Emily Dickinson's writing projects have thus been inaccessible to the general reader.

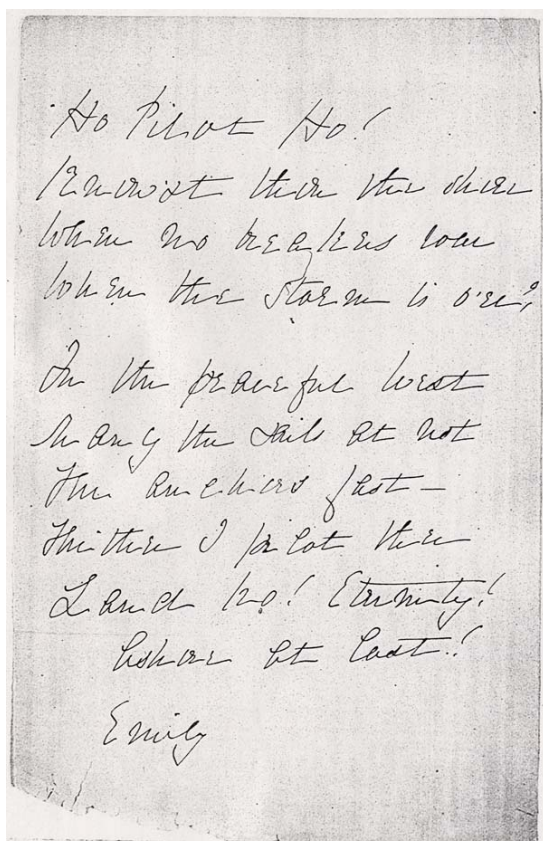
The textual body, Dickinson's manuscripts, is a powerful witness to Susan's entanglements in Emily's compositional and distribution practices. Sending another writings in one's casual script (as Emily does to Susan), in the handwriting more similar to one's private notes, is an act that speaks trust, familiarity, routine. Sometimes placing those writings on less formal stationery, scraps of paper lacking gilt edges or elegant embossments to impress likewise signals the intimacy of comfortable quotidian exchange, a correspondence not bounded by and to special occasions, but an everyday writing habit taking as its subject any element of life's course, from the monumental death of a beloved to the presumably negligible nuisance of indigestion. These expressions to and about Susan uttered in pencil, ink, on elegant stationery and on the backs of envelopes were powerful enough to drive Susan herself to destroy those "too personal and adulatory ever to be printed" ("Correspondence with William Hayes Ward," 14 March 1891, *WSD*) and to provoke someone else to scissor half of a sheet out of one of Emily's early, four-page letters to Austin, to erase several lines out of another and words out of others, and to ink over every line of "One Sister have I in the house" (F 2, JP 14, FP 5; see also OMC 30).

Public and private forces have thus worked in concert to leave untold stories about meanings of the fact that so many poems were sent to a single contemporary and about what might motivate readers (including the addressee herself) to feel justified suppressing writings to that primary audience of Dickinson. Following the conventions of typographical bookmaking, editors first working with the Dickinson documents were more focused on relaying the linguistic elements of her writings and the stories embedded therein and ignored the stories spelled by the material elements of her writings altogether. As the first century of reading Dickinson progressed and editors such as Johnson and Franklin began to grapple more and more with the material elements, the amount of information to be gleaned, sorted, and evaluated proved to be astounding. Conventional principles of selection discouraged recognition of the salience of material facts like paper type and size that are so telling in the Susan corpus. At the same time a particular reception of Susan's relevance to Emily's writing had been set, one that held that Susan was important but was most interested in her own daughter's career. Though that reception diminishing Susan as audience for Emily's writing was by mid-twentieth century a public one and has influenced Dickinson's editors, its origins are private. The failure to interpret these stories conveyed through the distinctive nature of the writings and then through physical handlings of them has not simply been a matter of editorial priorities. Consequently, this extraordinary body—"so many mss. of Emily's" in Susan's possession—and their many characteristics, especially physical aspects that relay information about the nature of this relationship (such as the pictorial elements, drawings and cutouts, to which Susan herself called attention), tended to confound.

## Poems from Dickinson to Gilbert

**“Ho Pilot Ho!” (1853)<sup>1</sup>**

Ho Pilot Ho!  
 Know'st thou the shore  
 When no breakers roar  
 When the storm is o'er?  
 In the peaceful West  
 Many the sails at rest  
 The anchors fast -  
 Thither I pilot thee  
 Land ho! Eternity!  
 Ashore at last!



<sup>1</sup> “Ho Pilot Ho!” is believed to be the first poem Dickinson sent to Gilbert, when they were both 23-years-old.

#### 14. "One Sister have I in our house"

One Sister have I in our house -  
 And one a hedge away.  
 There's only one recorded,  
 But both belong to me.

One came the way that I came -  
 And wore my past year's gown -  
 The other as a bird her nest,  
 Built our hearts among.

She did not sing as we did -  
 It was a different tune -  
 Herself to her a Music  
 As Bumble-bee of June.

Today is far from Childhood -  
 But up and down the hills  
 I held her hand the tighter -  
 Which shortened all the miles -

And still her hum  
 The years among,  
 Deceives the Butterfly;  
 Still in her Eye  
 The Violets lie  
 Mouldered this many May.

I spilt the dew -  
 But took the morn, -  
 I chose this single star  
 From out the wide night's numbers -  
 Sue - forevermore!

#### 84. “Her breast is fit for pearls” (1859)<sup>2</sup>

##### *Letter Version*

Her breast is fit for pearls,  
 But I was not a "Diver" -  
 Her brow is fit for thrones  
 But I have not a crest.

Her heart is fit for home- [rest crossed out]  
 I - a Sparrow - build there  
 Sweet of twigs and twine  
 My perennial nest.

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<sup>2</sup> The person Dickinson had in mind here is not known for certain. However, Martha Nell Smith has proposed that the erased name of “Sue” can be detected in a letter where a manuscript for the poem appears. Stephanie Burley explains, “This particular poem calls for a careful contextualization, especially since the standard narrative of its transmission has recently been called into question. According to Samuel Johnson’s variorum (1955) two versions of ‘Her breast is fit for pearls,’ were written about 1859. One version was sent as a letter, and another appears in Fascicle 5. The epistolary version was first printed in Mabel Loomis Todd’s 1894 edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, in a chapter titled “To Mr. & Mrs. Bowles.” This same version also appears in Bianchi’s *The Life and Letters Of Emily Dickinson* (1924). Todd was apparently the first to claim that this poem was addressed to Samuel Bowles, and subsequent editors did not question this assumption. However, recently Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith...have contested this claim by detecting the erased name ‘Sue’ on the verso of the epistolary version. In light of this new evidence, it seems plausible that the epistolary version of this poem was actually addressed to Dickinson’s close friend, literary collaborator, and sister-in-law, Susan [Gilbert] Dickinson. The draft quality of the epistolary version, with “rest” crossed out, seems consistent with the narrative of Susan Dickinson as Emily Dickinson’s primary literary confidante, a theory posited by Hart and Smith....While the story behind the intended destination of this poem/letter remains occluded by the battles over the possession of Dickinson’s manuscripts following her death (see Smith, 1989), the critics do agree that this poem was presented as a letter to *someone*, and this epistolary context may add to the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the poem. Therefore, I have chosen to include my transcriptions of both the letter and the fascicle versions in this edition.”

## 216. “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” (1859)<sup>3</sup>

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.

Light laughs the breeze  
 In her Castle above them —  
 Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,  
 Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence —  
 Ah, what sagacity perished here!

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 disk of snow.

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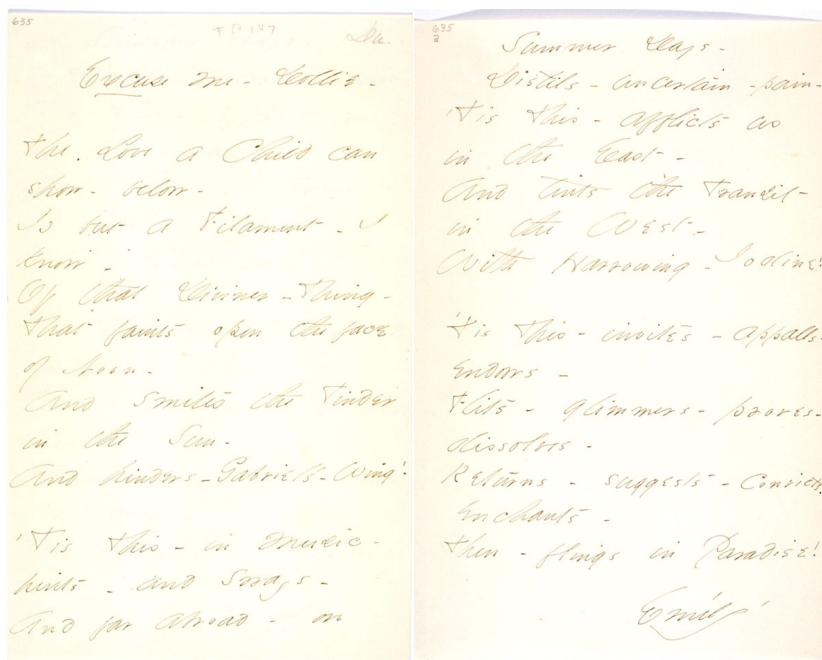
<sup>3</sup> Martha Nell Smith proposes that this poem provides insight into Dickinson’s unique willingness to share her work with and to seek advice from Gilbert. Smith writes: The lack of a clear biographical account of as well as a lack of a cultural model for Susan and Emily Dickinson’s relationship make the following set of facts, available in part since 1914 and almost in full since 1955-58 (when Johnson published the *Poems* and *Letters*), difficult to interpret. ‘I am not suited dear Emily with the second verse,’ Susan wrote to her beloved friend and sister-in-law about 1861. In this, Susan responds to a version of ‘Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,’ one which featured a whole other second stanza than the two-stanza poem she had already seen. Among the ten lyrics known to be printed during the poet’s lifetime, ‘Safe in their Alabaster Chambers’ offers the only example of Emily Dickinson responding directly to another reader’s advice. At the behest of Susan, Dickinson revised this poem several times. She labored over its composition, searching for an appropriate second stanza, and in the process wrote four different verses for possible coupling with the striking first (OMC 58-63). These facts are especially important since Dickinson is perhaps most well-known for her isolation, for purportedly writing in complete solitude. Until the 1990s, critics and biographers have been virtually silent on what this exchange between the two women means. Both of them were writers, yet neither was what one would call a professional writer. Both were readers, yet neither was what one would call a professional reader, a critic, an ‘expert.’ If this were Wordsworth and Coleridge, or Hawthorne and Melville, or Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, interpreters would declare literary liaison with certainty. Yet most have balked, hesitated, and some have shrugged, saying this is the exception (of Emily reaching out to another concerning the writing of a poem) that proves the rule (that reaching out was not her habit). However, the ease with which Emily approaches Susan and with which Susan delivers her response suggests that this exchange was a habit of their relationship, that this kind of give and take between them was the rule. [...] The many drafts of poems forwarded to Susan over the entire course of Emily’s decades-long writing career make visible Susan’s role as consultant, collaborator, liaison. The most extensive single example of her contributions to Emily Dickinson’s writing a poem, Susan Dickinson’s responses to different versions of ‘Safe in their Alabaster Chambers’ indicates that she critiqued the text while Dickinson was in the process of writing, and that that the effects of Susan’s responses to reading the poem are evident in its various incarnations. Susan wrote to Emily when she saw the poem published in the Springfield Daily Republican and is likely responsible for its printing in the newspaper read by the Dickinson households. In other words, from their writing back and forth about the poem, it is clear that Susan was a vital participant in its composition and transmission (OMC 58-62 and ‘Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem,’ *DEA*).”



**“Excuse me—Dollie—” (1863)**

The Love a Child can show - below -  
 Is but a Filament - I know -  
 Of that Diviner - Thing -  
 That faints upon the face of Noon -  
 And smites the tinder in the Sun -  
 And hinders - Gabriel's - Wing!  
 'Tis This - in music - hints - and sways -  
 And far abroad - on Summer Days -  
 Distils - uncertain - pain -  
 'Tis This - afflicts us in the East -  
 And tints the Transit - in the West -  
 With Harrowing - Iodine!

'Tis This - invites - appalls - endows -  
 Flits - glimmers - proves - dissolves -  
 Returns - suggests - convicts - enchants -  
 Then - flings in Paradise!



**269. Wild nights – Wild nights!**

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!<sup>4</sup>

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**518. “Her sweet Weight on my Heart”<sup>5</sup>**

Her sweet Weight on my Heart a Night  
 Had scarcely deigned to lie —  
 When, stirring, for Belief's delight,  
 My Bride had slipped away —

If 'twas a Dream — made solid — just  
 The Heaven to confirm —  
 Or if Myself were dreamed of Her —  
 The power to presume —

With Him remain — who unto Me —  
 Gave — even as to All —  
 A Fiction superseding Faith —  
 By so much — as 'twas real —

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<sup>4</sup> I do not believe we know the intended subject or recipient of this poem.

<sup>5</sup> In reference to this poem, Lillian Faderman wrote in a 1977 article: “John Walsh states that ‘the poem ‘Her sweet Weight on my Heart’ is another elegy for Elizabeth Barrett Browning,” whose *Aurora Leigh* was one of Dickinson's favorite poetic works. But the problem with Walsh's interpretation is that it takes too literally the notion of curling up in bed with a good book. Poems such as these are best understood as being homo erotic. The first biographer to consider Dickinson's homoeroticism was Rebecca Patterson who received such excoriating reviews that biographers of a whole generation were effectively silenced if they saw any truth in Patterson's suggestions. Twenty years after the publication of Patterson's book, the psychiatrist John Cody also concluded that Dickinson's poems and letters indicate that she probably had strong emotional attachments to women. Outside of these works, however, few critics attempt to deal with what is an apparent homoerotic strain not only in her poetry but also in her letters.”

**809. “Unable are the Loved to die” (1865)**

Unable are the Loved to die  
 For Love is Immortality,  
 Nay, it is Deity—

Unable they that love—to die  
 For Love reforms Vitality  
 Into Divinity.

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**1248. “The Incidents of Love”**

The incidents of love  
 Are more than its Events —  
 Investment’s best Expositor  
 Is the minute Per Cents —

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**1401. “To own a Susan of my own”**

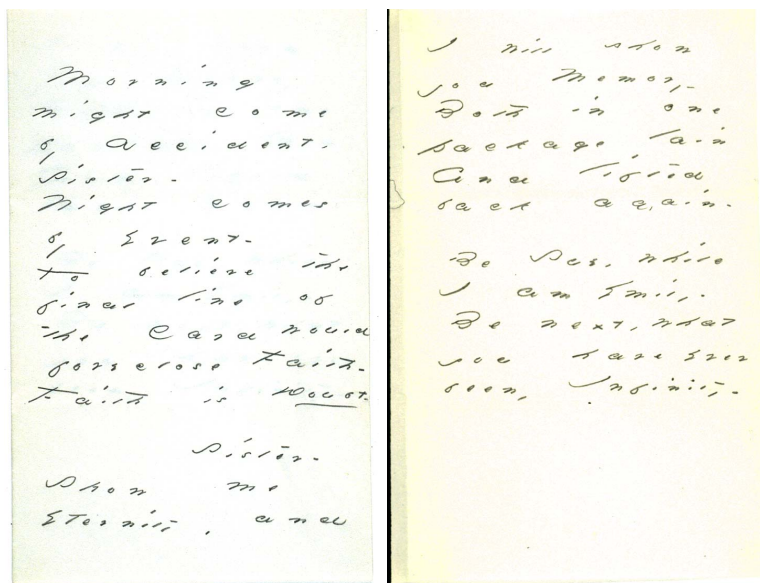
To own a Susan of my own  
 Is of itself a Bliss —  
 Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,  
 Continue me in this!

**“Morning might come by Accident” (1884)**

Morning  
might come  
by Accident,  
Sister —  
Night comes  
by Event —  
To believe the  
final line of  
the Card would  
foreclose Faith —  
Faith is Doubt.

Sister —  
Show me  
Eternity, and  
I will show  
you Memory —  
Both in one  
package lain  
And lifted  
back again.

Be Sue, while  
I am Emily.  
Be next, what  
you have ever  
been, Infinity —



## Letters from Dickinson to Gilbert

6 February 1852 [to Susan Gilbert]

*. . . sometimes I shut my eyes, and shut my heart towards you, and try hard to forget you because you grieve me so, but you'll never go away, Oh you never will—say, Susie, promise me again, and I will smile faintly—and take up my little cross of sad—sad separation. How vain it seems to write, when one knows how to feel—how much more near and dear to sit beside you, talk with you, hear the tones of your voice; so hard to deny thyself, and take up thy cross, and follow me'—give me strength, Susie, write me of hope and love, and of hearts that endured, and great was their reward of 'Our Father who art in Heaven.' I dont [sic] know how I shall bear it, when the gentle spring comes; if she should come and see me and talk to me of you, Oh it would surely kill me! While the frost clings to the windows, and the World is stern and drear; this absence is easier; the Earth mourns too, for all her little birds; but when they all come back again, and she sings and is so merry—pray, what will become of me? Susie, forgive me, forget all what I say. . .*

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11 February 1852 [to Susan Gilbert]<sup>6</sup>

*I have but one thought, Susie, this afternoon of June, and that of you, and I have one prayer, only; dear Susie, that is for you. That you and I in hand as we e'en do in heart, might ramble away as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many years, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again — I would it were so, Susie, and when I look around me and find myself alone, I sigh for you again; little sigh, and vain sigh, which will not bring you home.*

*I need you more and more, and the great world grows wider, and dear ones fewer and fewer, every day that you stay away — I miss my biggest heart; my own goes wandering round, and calls for Susie — Friends are too dear to sunder, Oh they are far too few, and how soon they will go away where you and I cannot find them, don't let us forget these things, for their remembrance now will save us many an anguish when it is too late to love them! Susie, forgive me Darling, for every word I say — my heart is full of you, none other than you is in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me. If you were here — and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language — I try to bring you nearer, I chase the weeks away till they are quite departed, and fancy you have come, and I am on my way through the green lane to meet you, and my heart goes scampering so, that I have much ado to bring it back again, and learn it to be patient, till that dear Susie comes. Three weeks — they can't last always, for surely they must go with their little brothers and sisters to their long home in the West!*

*I shall grow more and more impatient until that dear day comes, for till now, I have only mourned for you; now I begin to hope for you.*

*Dear Susie, I have tried hard to think what you would love, of something I might send you — I at last say my little Violets, they begged me to let them go, so here they are — and with them as Instructor, a bit of knightly grass, who also begged the favor to accompany them — they are but small, Susie, and I fear not fragrant now, but they will speak to you of warm hearts at home, and of something faithful which “never slumbers nor sleeps” — Keep them 'neath your pillow, Susie, they will make you dream of blue-skies, and home, and the “blessed contrie”! You and I will have an hour with “Edward” and “Ellen Middleton”, sometime when you get home — we must find out if some things contained therein are true, and if they are, what you and me are coming to!*

*Now, farewell, Susie, and Vinnie sends her love, and mother her's, and I add a kiss, shyly, lest there is somebody there! Don't let them see, will you Susie?*

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<sup>6</sup> One thing we've discussed in recent weeks is the way popular digital venues have had a profound impact on the circulation and visibility of LGBTQ histories. For an example pertaining to this letter, check out a 2016 *Jezebel* article titled “Emily Dickinson's Love Letter to Her Sister-in-Law Will ‘Pummel’ Your Heart on Valentine's Day”: <https://jezebel.com/emily-dickinsons-love-letter-to-her-sister-in-law-will-1759080582>

[?] February 1852 [to Susan Gilbert]

*. . . Thank you for loving me, darling, and will you "love me more if ever you come home"?—It is enough, dear Susie, I know I shall be satisfied. But what can I do towards you?—dearer you cannot be, for I love you so already, that it almost breaks my heart—perhaps I can love you anew, every day of my life, every morning and evening—Oh if you will let me, how happy I shall be!*

*The precious billet, Susie, I am wearing the paper out, reading it over and o'er, but the dear thoughts cant [sic] wear out if they try, Thanks to Our Father, Susie! Vinnie and I talked of you all last evening long, and went to sleep mourning for you, and pretty soon I waked up saying, "Precious treasure, thou art mine" and there you were all right, my Susie, and I hardly dared to sleep lest someone steal you away. . .*

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27 June 1852 [to Susan Gilbert]

*. . . Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? Shall I indeed behold you, not "darkly, but face to face" or am I fancying so, and dreaming blessed dreams from which the day will wake me? I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you—that the expectation once more to see your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast—I go to sleep at night, and the first thing I know, I am sitting there wide awake, and clasping my hands tightly, and thinking of next Saturday, and "never a bit" of you. Sometimes I must have Saturday before tomorrow comes.*

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28 February 1855 [to Susan and Martha Gilbert]

*. . . Dear Children—Mattie—Sue—for one look at you, for your gentle voices, Pd exchange it all. The pomp—the court—the etiquette—they are of the earth—will not enter Heaven.*

*Will you write to me—why havn't [sic] you before? I feel so tired looking for you, and still you do not come. And you love me, come soon—this is not forever, you know, this mortal life of our's [sic]. Which had you rather I wrote you—what I am doing here, or who I am loving there?*

*Perhaps I'll tell you both, but the 'last shall be first, and the first last.' I'm loving you at home—I'm coming every hour to your chamber door. I'm thinking when awake, how sweet if you were with me, and to talk with you as I fall asleep, would be sweeter still.*

*I think I cannot wait, when I remember you, and that is always, Children. I shall love you more for this sacrifice.*

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Late January 1855 [to Susan Gilbert]

*. . . I miss you, mourn for you, and walk the Streets alone—often at nighty beside, I fall asleep in tears, for your dear face, yet not one word comes back to me from that silent West. If it is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love in; but if it lives and beats stilly still lives and beats for me, then say me so, and I will strike the strings to one more strain of happiness before I die.*

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## Gilbert's Obituary for Dickinson

May 18, 1886

## MISS EMILY DICKINSON OF AMHERST.

The death of Miss Emily Dickinson, daughter of the late Edward Dickinson, at Amherst on Saturday, makes another sad inroad on the small circle so long occupying the old family mansion. It was for a long generation overlooked by death, and one passing in and out there thought of old-fashioned times, when parents and children grew up and passed maturity together, in lives of singular uneventfulness unmarked by sad or joyous crises. Very few in the village, excepting among the older inhabitants, knew Miss Emily personally, although the facts of her seclusion and her intellectual brilliancy were familiar Amherst traditions. There are many houses among all classes into which her treasures of fruit and flowers and ambrosial dishes for the sick and well were constantly sent, that will forever miss those evidences of her unselfish consideration, and mourn afresh that she screened herself from close acquaintance. As she passed on in life, her sensitive nature shrank from much personal contact with the world, and more and more turned to her own large wealth of individual resources for companionship, sitting thenceforth, as some one said of her, "In the light of 'her own fire.'" Not disappointed with the world, not an invalid until within the past two years, not from any lack of sympathy, not because she was insufficient of any mental work or social career - her endowments being so exceptional - but the "mesh of her soul," as Browning calls the body, was too rare, and the sacred quiet of her own home proved the fit atmosphere for her worth and work. All that must be inviolate. One can only speak of "duties beautifully done"; of her gentle tillage of the rare flowers filling her conservatory, into which, as into the heavenly Paradise, entered nothing that could defile, and which was ever abloom in frost or sunshine, so well she knew her subtle chemistries; of her tenderness to all in the home circle; her gentlewoman's grace and courtesy to all who served in house and grounds; her quick and rich response to all who rejoiced or suffered at home, or among her wide circle of friends the world over. This side of her nature was to her the real entity in which she rested, so simple and strong was her instinct that a woman's hearthstone is her shrine. Her talk and her writings were like no one's else, and although she never published a line, now and then some enthusiastic literary friend would turn love to larceny, and cause a few verses surreptitiously obtained to be printed. Thus, and through other natural ways, many saw and admired her verses, and in consequence frequently notable persons paid her visits, hoping to overcome the protest of her own nature and gain a promise of occasional contributions, at least, to various magazines. She withstood even the fascinations of Mrs. Helen Jackson, who earnestly sought her co-operation in a novel of the No-Name series, although one little poem somehow strayed into the volume of verse which appeared in that series. Her pages would ill have fitted even so attractive a story as "Mercy Philbrick's Choice," unwilling though a large part of the literary public were to believe that she had no part in it. "Her wagon was hitched to a star," - and who could ride or write with such a voyager? A Damascus blade gleaming and glancing in the sun was her wit. Her swift poetic rapture was like the long glistening note of a bird one hears in the June woods at high noon, but can never see. Like a magician she caught the shadowy apparitions of her brain and tossed them in startling picturesqueness to her friends, who, charmed with their simplicity and homeliness as well as profundity, fretted that she

had so easily made palpable the tantalizing fancies forever eluding their bungling, fettered grasp. So intimate and passionate a part of the high march sky, the summer day and bird-call. Keen and eclectic in her literary tastes, she sifted libraries to Shakespeare and Browning; quick as the electric spark in her intuitions and analyses, she seized the kernel instantly, almost impatient of the fewest words by which she must make her revelation. To her life was rich, and all aglow with God and immortality. With no creed, no formulated faith, hardly knowing the names of dogmas, she walked this life with the gentleness and reverence of old saints, with the firm step of martyrs who sing while they suffer. How better note the flight of this "soul of fire in a shell of pearl" than by her own words? -Morns like these, we parted; Noons like these, she rose; Fluttering first, then firmer, To her fair repose.