POETRY FOR KIDS

Emily Dickinson

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHRISTINE DAVENIER

EDITED BY SUSAN SNIVELY, PHD

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Publisher's Note

Many years ago, my grandmother read poetry to me at a very young age, even Shakespeare. She felt, as I now can appreciate, that the emotion and mood of poetry, even when it is almost too hard to understand, is so essential to understanding the world around us. I'm hoping that this series, with its selection of a very diverse group of poets, and with art by some of the world's best illustrators, will bring that all to life for a new generation. –Charles Nurnberg

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6 Orchard Road, Suite 100
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quartoknows.com
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Introduction

EMILY DICKINSON WAS BORN ON DECEMBER 10, 1830, AND DIED ON MAY 15, 1886.

She lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, all her life, occupying a large brick house on Main Street near a huge meadow, the railroad station, and a hat factory. Two blocks away was Amherst College, which her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson had helped to found in 1821. Emily's father, Edward, was a lawyer, treasurer of Amherst College, a member of the General Court of Massachusetts, and, briefly, a US congressman. He married Emily Norcross of Monson, Massachusetts, in May 1828. A quiet, sweet-natured woman, Emily Norcross was well educated and especially talented at gardening and baking. She and Edward had three children: Austin, born in 1829; Emily; and Lavinia, born in 1833. The smart, lively children shared a love of reading, music, nature, and each other's company.

Edward Dickinson helped to bring the railroad to the small town in 1853. Emily frequently heard the train's "horrid, hooting stanza," the whistles from the hat factory, and even the sounds of tumbling acrobats and caged animals moving along Main Street in the middle of the night when the circus came to town. The large windows of The Homestead showed Emily the dramas of the changing seasons and of life in "a country town."

The poet's life was both quiet and busy. She visited Washington, DC, and also journeyed to Philadelphia, Hartford, Worcester, Springfield, Boston, and Cambridge. Yet Emily Dickinson felt most comfortable at home. "Home is a holy thing," she remarked. She baked bread for the household, worked in the huge garden, wrote possibly ten thousand letters—think of what she might have done with e-mail!—and created poems that were unlike anybody else's poems: full of word-play, startling images, puzzles, and surprises.

In her mid-thirties, Emily developed a severe eye problem and was treated in Boston, where she stayed with her cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross. After "months of Siberia," she eventually improved. In 1874, her father, Edward, died unexpectedly of a stroke, and the following year, Emily's mother suffered a stroke that left her dependent on her daughters and their servant and friend Maggie Maher. Emily gradually withdrew from social activity, although she enjoyed visits from her good friends and baked gingerbread for the neighborhood children. The care of her mother, her devotion to writing poetry, and the pleasures of gardening took much of Emily's time.

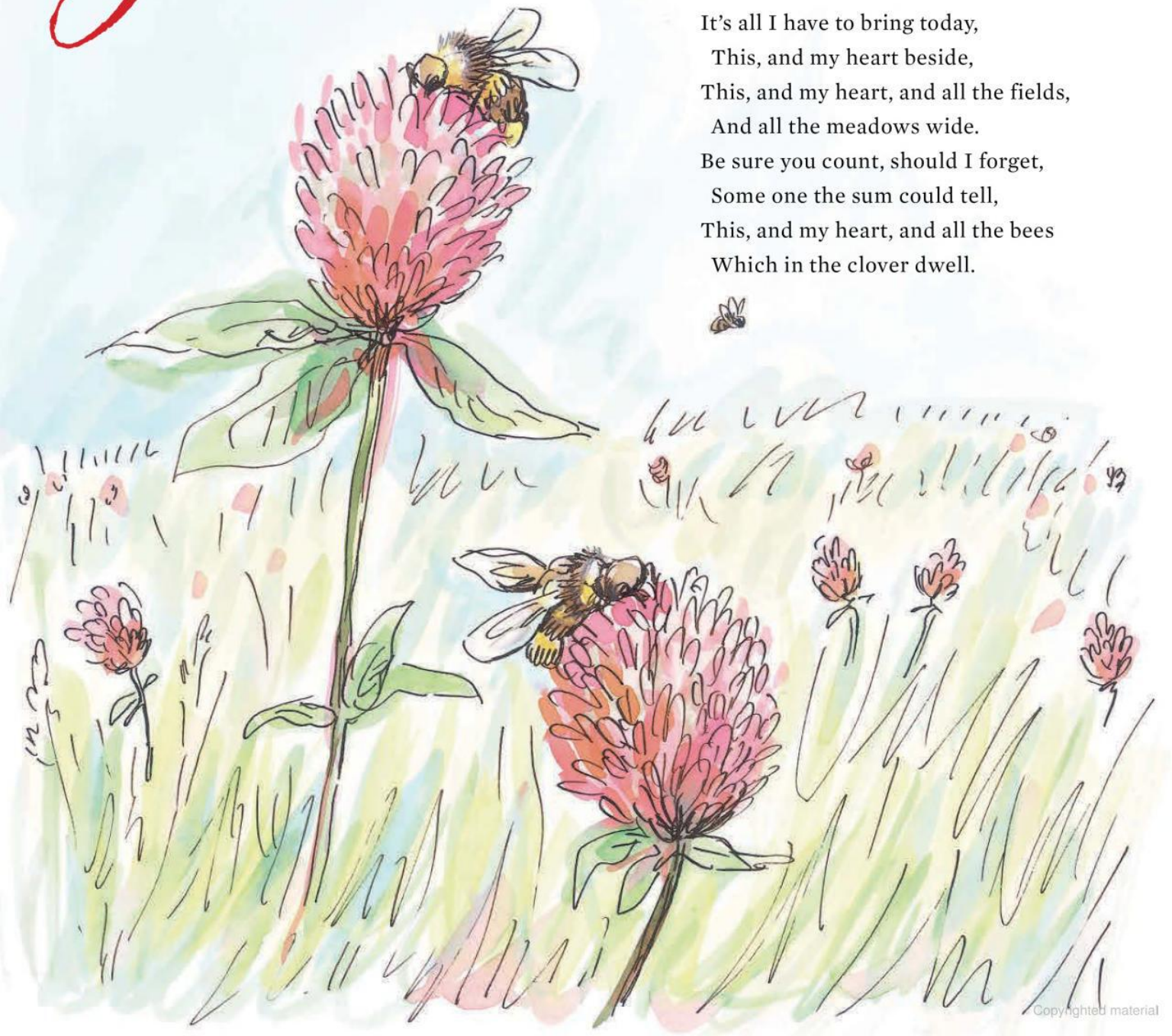
Emily Dickinson's poems are populated by the birds, insects, frogs, snakes, and other creatures she observed on her property. Their activities, lives, and deaths seem like those of her relations. Her lifelong interest in science, especially botany and astronomy, enriched her language with beauty and wonder.

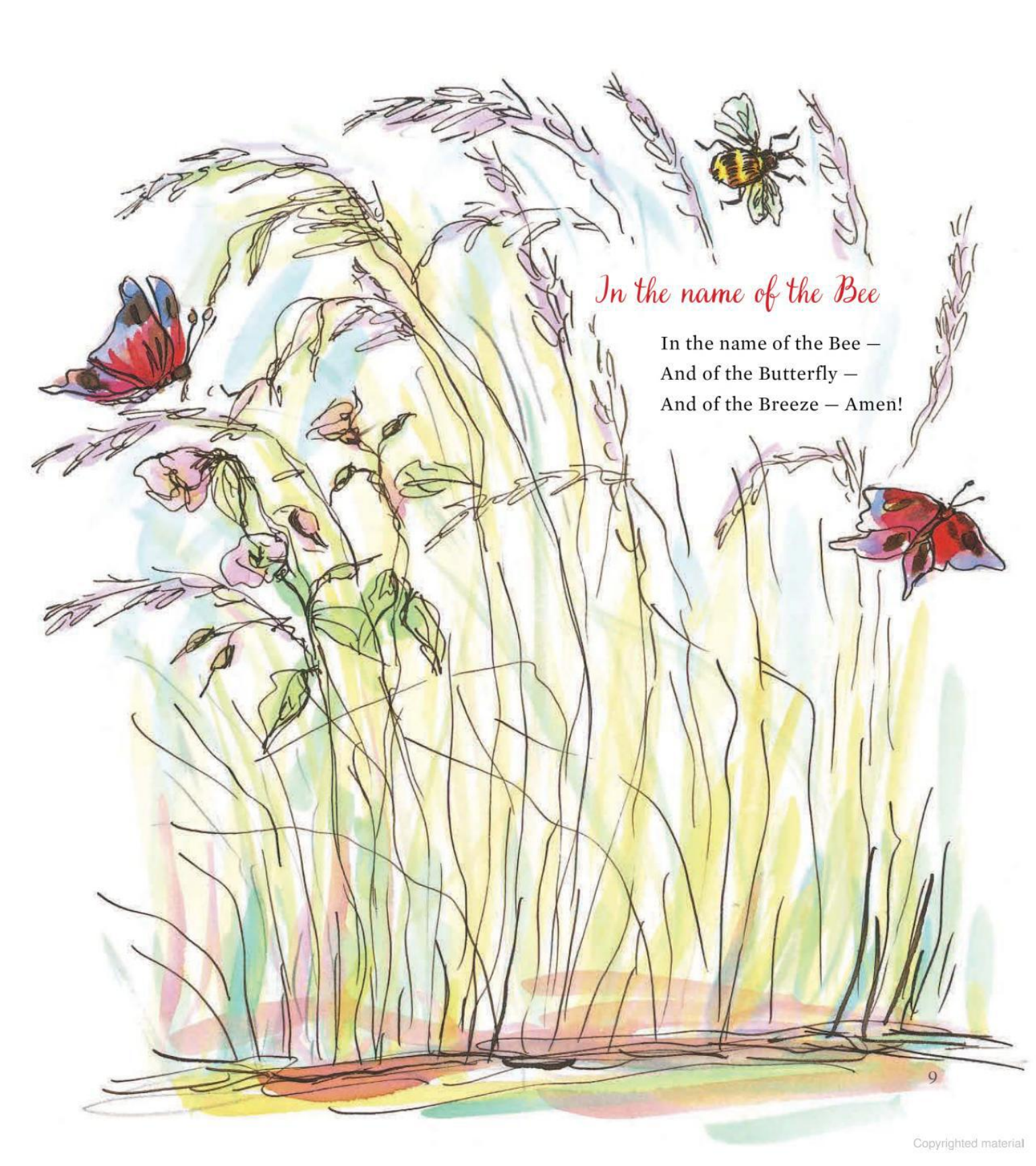
Emily died at age fifty-five in 1886, of hypertension, leaving behind a treasure trove of nearly 1,800 poems. In November 1890, her first volume, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, was published, and went into eleven printings in one year. Now her readers can view her poems online (http://www.edickinson.org/), decipher her quirky handwriting, study the words she played with, and, as her sister, Lavinia, predicted, behold the poet's "genius."

Summer

It's all I have to bring today

It's all I have to bring today,
  This, and my heart beside,
This, and my heart, and all the fields,
  And all the meadows wide.
Be sure you count, should I forget,
  Some one the sum could tell,
This, and my heart, and all the bees
  Which in the clover dwell.





In the name of the Bee

In the name of the Bee —
And of the Butterfly —
And of the Breeze — Amen!

I'm nobody! Who are you?

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us — don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

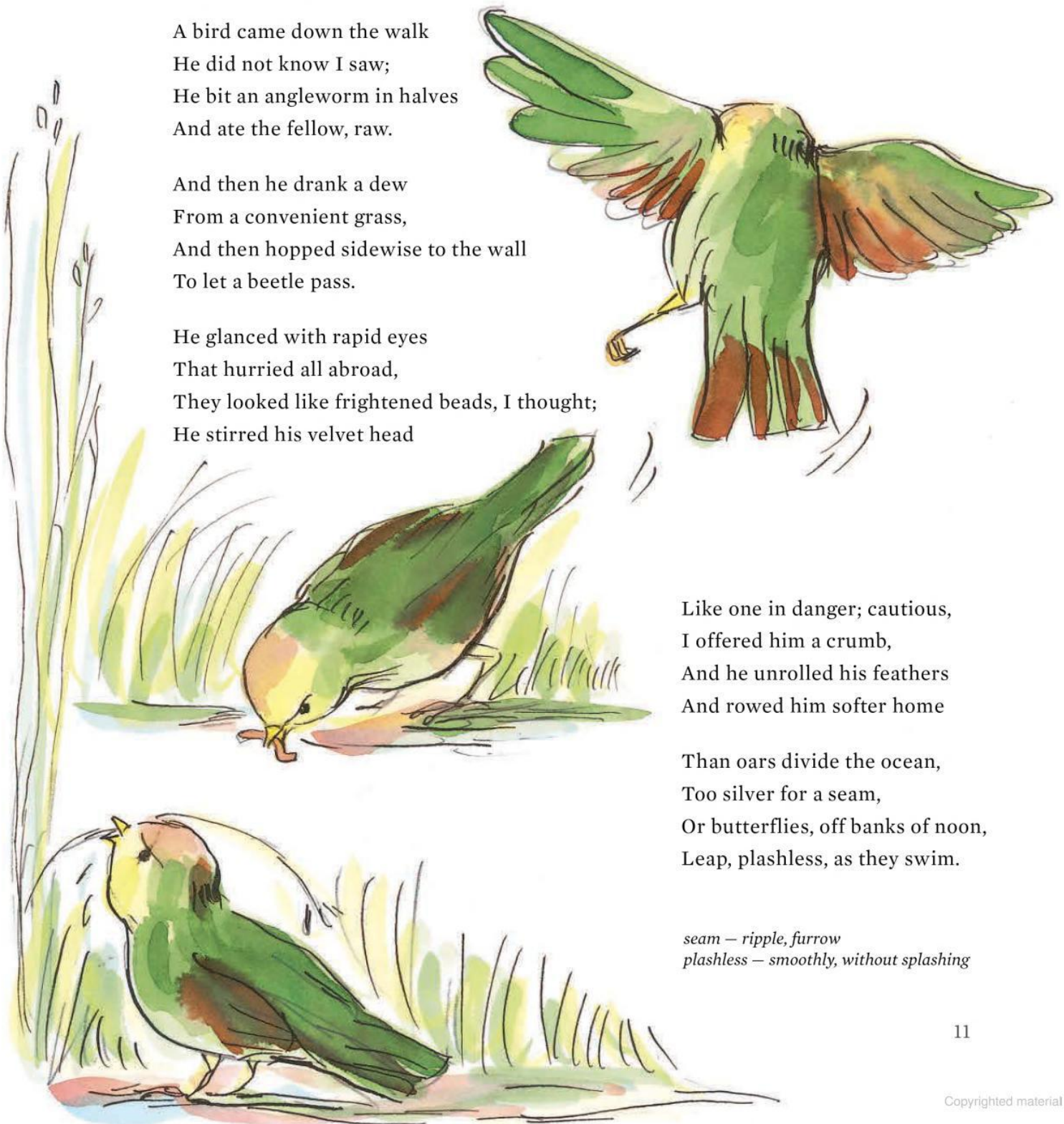
livelong — whole
bog — muddy swamp

A bird came down the walk

A bird came down the walk
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad,
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head



Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

seam — ripple, furrow
plashless — smoothly, without splashing