AÍFE MURRAY

Maid as *Muse*

How Servants Changed Emily Dickinson's Life and Language

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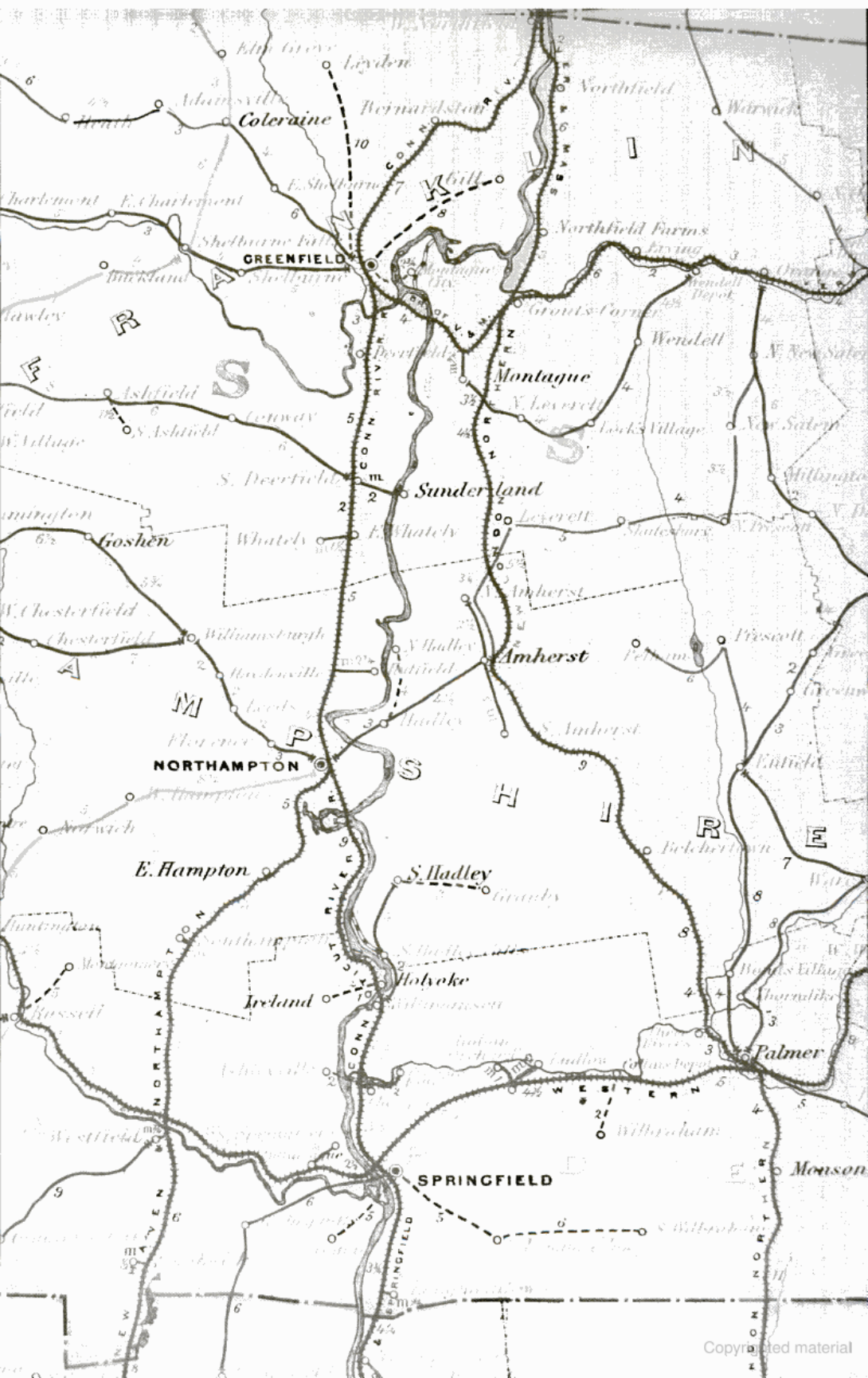
AUTHOR'S NOTE

The poems that appear throughout this book adhere to the line breaks found in the poet's original manuscripts and not as they have been posthumously edited.

Maid as *Muse*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Introduction

Walking Backward to Something You Know Is There

It started with a question that was answered by a photograph. That I asked the question at all occurred because I had set out to construct my lineage as a writer. For a woman writer, "parentage" is not assured.[1] From Virginia Woolf to Eavan Boland, Paule Marshall, and Alicia Ostriker, we are told that women writers think back through their mothers—lives often measured by hungry mouths and the circumference of survival. Boland offers that the "way to the past is never smooth. For a woman poet it can be especially tortuous. Every step towards an origin is also an advance towards a silence."[2]

I had no writerly antecedents, no near models in my working-class Irish Catholic family, so I set out to understand my literary inheritance and place within it by reading forward chronologically from the eighth-century Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and medieval Welsh tales of *The Mabinogi*, through Chaucer and Shakespeare to Phillis Wheatley and Emily Dickinson. I planned to keep going right up to the present but I stopped in my tracks at Emily's poetry. I was arrested not just by the astonishing language but by the sheer size of her opus.

She left behind about 1,800 poems with many having two or more versions that were sent on various occasions to others in a postal envelope, the pocket of a boy messenger, or beside a bloom. Of her voluminous correspondence some 1,200 letters and prose fragments have been recovered; apparently only a tenth of her "letter[s] to the world" (FP 519). It's an extraordinary body of work for someone living in nineteenth-century America with a reputation as an exquisite cook and prize-winning baker. At her father's insistence she composed the family's breads and puddings, wine and jams. Emily had inherited her mother's fine culinary sense and this was something her parents and siblings, Austin and Lavinia, came to depend on.

Scorning my own meager writerly output I thought about Emily cooking or baking without my twenty-first century conveniences. In childhood the budding poet traveled to the local mill by wagon with her father to wait for their grain to be milled. My flour was not only ground somewhere out of sight but a bakery was turning out the good smelling loaves. A roasted chicken wasn't first pecking in my yard; it was plucked, quartered, and chilling mutely in a cooler when we met for the first time. But having once been an active maker of breads,

cakes, and pies, even trying my hand at yogurt and wine, I knew what kind of time Emily would have spent in the kitchen—as when mixing up this family recipe for rice cake:

One cup of ground rice.
One cup of powdered sugar.
Two eggs.
One-half a cup of butter.
One spoonful of milk with a little soda.
Flavor to suit.
(signed)
Cousin Emily[3]

I have an old-fashioned recipe for "1-2-3-4 Cake" favored by my grandmother because it's easy for a busy cook to keep the recipe in her head: 1 cup (c.) butter, 2 c. sugar, 3 c. flour, and 4 eggs. To make this good-size cake I spend about an hour gathering ingredients, measuring, grating spices or rinds, and mixing and folding the batter. Another hour sees the cake through baking, cooling, and turning it out of the pan. With an electric mixer I don't have to cream butter and sugar by hand, as Emily did, until they are light and fluffy to form the beginning of a good cake. My butter doesn't arrive at the back door as warm cream in pails, that arm muscles will churn into butter, but in measured sticks wrapped in wax paper. The last stage, that makes a big light cake—beating the egg whites into soft but still moist peaks for "folding" into the batter—can be achieved in minutes at my electric mixer's highest speed. Even without beaten egg whites, if Emily simply mixed up a "one bowl" cake, it still required lots of her time, attention, and "elbow grease."

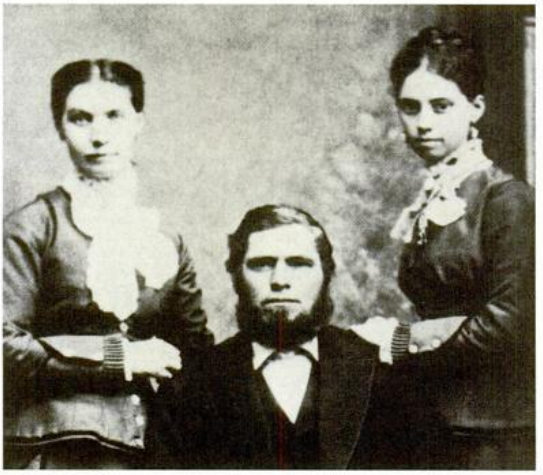
I know my oven is "slow" meaning my cakes take a bit longer than a recipe suggests. Emily had a wood-fueled stove without a thermostat.[4] Temperature was measured by holding her hand inside the oven and counting until she was forced to withdraw it because of the heat. And to achieve the right baking temperature, she adjusted stove flues according to the hardness and dryness of wood, for these determine combustion rates. Nineteenth-century stove management, primitive and complex, required continual attention to wind movements and "other atmospheric vagaries" and stayed on the cook's mind during the cake's baking and through the day. A cake or two is one day's baking for me on the occasional Saturday, but it was vastly different 150 years ago. Bakers like Emily tended to work in volume, daily turning out several loaf cakes, a dozen tarts, a half dozen pies or puddings, loaves of bread, and even crackers—before the rise of commercial bakeries—that accompanied three hearty meals enjoyed by the family and frequent guests. Her letters indicate that the poet authored

jellies in addition to currant and malmsey wines. That's a lot of time in the kitchen.

Given such labor-intensiveness I wondered who made Emily's prolific writing life possible? Considering this, as I stood in the library's reading room with its clerestory windows I pulled Richard Sewall's biography from the shelf. In answer to my question the book fell open to a plate captioned "The Dickinson domestics, about 1870."[5] The man seated in the center resembled my grandfather. He was flanked by two women in identical dress, each standing with a hand resting at his shoulder. Margaret Kelley, the younger one on the right, had her body turned to the side as she gazed out over her father, Tom Kelley. On the left stood Margaret Maher (MM), the younger sister of Tom's wife, Mary. Facing forward, she confidently met the camera, her right eyebrow arched. Margaret Maher's steady gaze suggested that she was a force to be reckoned with. And I wasn't the only one captivated by this maid-of-all-work. The poet described her as "warm and wild and mighty," (JL 907) and under one roof for seventeen years they companionably shared the kitchen, baking together, doing dishes in the sink room, and fighting over who should be the giver of a gift to one of their agreed-upon favorites, the way intimates do.

The very straight back—one eyebrow arched—animation plays across Margaret Maher's face as she gazes at the viewer. Her bosom is tightened by the cuirass bodice, hidden by a white ruffled jabot. Emily must have touched her at times, laughing hard at something her maid said, throwing her arm about her shoulder, the calico-print dress damp at the hip, apron striped with grease. Was Margaret of a build sufficiently robust to the occupation? Lifting wet sheets, turning mattresses, helping an invalid to a commode chair, hauling pots onto the stove, blacking boots, scrubbing stairs, serving at table, and ironing with those heavy irons heated on the stove top and pushed hard across a dampened shirt back? Her hands in this photograph, taken probably in the early to mid-1870s, appear so white and small. Emily's hands, in her famous 1847 daguerreotype, are long with strong fingers and wide palms. Despite the dainty size of her hands, Margaret holds her arm assuredly at her waist; there's sheer power in her body to perform hard labor.

This was the moment when the story first grabbed my ankle and wouldn't let go. The impetus to find it and tell it came from realizing Emily Dickinson could never have been so literarily productive without servants. For her to write so much and so well, someone had to relieve her of a portion of the unrelenting household tasks that proscribed nineteenth-century lives. Otherwise the spark might have died inside her; what Tillie Olsen describes so well in her book *Silences*. Given that Emily's voice was dependent on someone, I knew it came at the price of the other's silence. My project, explored in writing and mixed media,



became an investigation of "silence and voice" in all its manifestations and interdependencies. What intrigued me were both the silence surrounding these servants and the layers of invisibility in this story. Dickinson's own writings about silence, and how she used the poetic page to express a silence palpable, drew me.

So soft opon
the Scene
The Act of evening
fell
We felt how
neighborly a thing
Was the
Invisible.
(FP 1225)

I went looking for servants in Emily's letters and was surprised by the frequency of the sightings: Bettie dressing a hen for dinner, the intonings of laundry worker Mrs. Mack, the "constancy" of stableman Dennis Scannell, the admonitions of gardener Horace Church, old Hannah in her "calico sarcophagus," and most warmly, for the praise never waned, the "courageous" (JL 668) Margaret Maher.[6] I was curious why, despite references in Emily's letters and scholar Jay Leyda's tribute to them, the Dickinsons' servants were all but ignored in biographies and critical works. Published in 1953, Leyda's essay "Miss Emily's Maggie" focuses particularly on maid-of-all-work Margaret Maher as well as laborer Tom Kelley who, in a radical departure from both Yankee and

Dickinson custom, was chosen by the poet as her chief pallbearer. Leyda's 1953 findings led to footnotes and appendixes in other scholars' books but no serious consideration of these women and men as having lives and motivations of their own or an effect on the poet. And this despite Leyda's urgings that "everyone who established any degree of contact with the poet... requires investigation. The people who worked for the family, for example—should they do no more than slide along the back drop of this drama, carrying their dish and pitchfork?"[7]

Why hadn't biographers or literary critics made anything of the fact that Emily stored her poems in her maid's trunk—as Polly Longsworth informed readers in her 1984 book on the poet's brother and his lover, Mabel Loomis Todd (who became Emily's posthumous editor)?[8] Half a century earlier in her 1932 biography, the poet's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi described a remarkable eyewitness scene that's been ignored.[9] Apparently the poet extracted a promise from Margaret to burn those stored poems after her death. This pledge was defied. Taken together, these two tantalizing revelations beckon.

What appeared to be a cleaving in the standard Dickinson narrative drew me. As a college student living a few miles from the Homestead I had scorned what little I knew of Emily's poetry. What I shrank from in that heyday of the second-wave women's movement was a perception of her flowery meekness—diminutive to the point of disappearing. She seemed the antithesis of what feminism sought to recover. In 1976, Julie Harris' one-woman show, *The Belle of Amherst*, was a death knell, confirming that Emily was, in her bodiless isolation, unnecessary. Discovering a maid of considerable importance to the poet augured a whole different story, one worthy of attention.

Margaret Maher left behind twenty-six letters and two dozen of these are deposited in an archive in the Detroit public library. That's where Jay Leyda first read them in December 1951. More than forty years later I borrowed a micro-film version and pored over Margaret's letters in a California library. As I scrolled back and forth, with light illuminating truncated sentences and margins splotched with ink, some things about her became clear, while others gaped. I had to confirm her presence and fill in the gaps. Visiting family in Connecticut the following August, I disappeared for a day hoping to find the trail warm. I followed Leyda's Amherst path walking out from the circumference of the well-trod Dickinson tale.

A foray to the archives in the town's library proved disappointing. Poor people flicker in and out of public records. When they do appear at all it's not uncommon for names to be misspelled, requiring acts of creative deduction to trace people. The Scannell family—which provided at least two stableman to the Dickinson family, Timothy and his son Dennis—appear variously as Scanlan, Scanlin, and Scanelly.[10] Marginality (lack of property, say, or the inability to

write or vote) contributed to the paucity of information. Some, especially women, never show up at all or disappear from the record. The poorest led peripatetic existences: their near destitution forced them to travel the region and up and down the Connecticut River looking for work. As his young family increased, Dickinson stableman Jeremiah Holden left Amherst with his wife and children for opportunities down in New Haven, Connecticut.[11] That one outside the family or community even knows the names of domestic servants is unusual and oftentime a byproduct of who the employer happened to be. To uncover this story I was going to have to follow Emily's admonition that "Success in Circuit / lies" (FP 1263).

Even Kelley Square has eluded the record. I found the Maher-Kelley family compound without the benefit of maps; as Melville wrote in *Moby Dick*, true places aren't so charted. On that first trip to Amherst, on a late August afternoon, Carol Birtwhistle, curator of the Homestead, stood on the drive above Main Street and pointed me southeast. I prickled with anticipation. At the edge

of a lumberyard in a young grove of trees I found remnants of roof slates, a tin water can grown fast between the twinned trunk of a sapling, and bricks that descendants later told me once lined the Kelley Square path. A neighbor from the house beyond that faces Dickinson Street recalled that the last buildings were torn down in the late 1980s and everything of value was carted away. Still impressed, he described the huge pieces of granite that made up the foundations and told me he managed to rescue a piece of decorative grillwork for the fireplace in his Martha's Vineyard house. "Too late," I silently mourned. When it was a thriving multigenerational family compound, it didn't appear on the Amherst town map. Town directories merely list inhabitants as living at the train depot. Now the Square is so noted after the last buildings are gone.

About the same time I was first tromping that thicket, writer and Amherst resident John Edgar Wideman was in South Carolina searching for his ancestral home. Persistence over a number of days led him eventually to find the "satellite Black community," also straddling railroad tracks, called Promised Land. Afterward Wideman remarked: "Maybe Promised Land lies where it does to teach us the inadequacy of maps we don't make ourselves, teach us the necessity of new maps, teach us how to create them, re-imagine connections others have forgotten or hidden."[12]

I determined right then to use the Kelley Square roof slates as a tablet for "MM's words and/or use as covers of books!" I scribbled that I next "went to the cemetery to imagine the walk the pallbearers took. Need to find out where she stated how she wanted the funeral to be (particularly her request for the pallbearers she chose)." Flushed, but not by August heat, I knew I must find Margaret Maher's grave. It was nearly six but I drove anyway to St. Brigid's in the center of town and knocked at the office and tried every church door before I sped south. Those five slates I had loaded into the car were the only tangible proof I had of her and of this day that left me "Exhilarated!"

> Gathered into the Earth,
> And out of story –
> Gathered to that
> Strange Fame –
> That lonesome Glory
> That hath no omen
> Here – but Awe –
> (FP 1398)

"My father thought very highly of my aunt," Miss Catherine Kelley relayed in the parlor of her niece's house. Miss Kelley's father, James, as a boy carried messages from the poet to her select few. We sat in the parlor of a sprawling

house on South East Street not far from Kelley Square where Miss Kelley had spent summers with her grandparents.[13] I came to Amherst to interview her and other descendants. Funded by small donations from several dozen "guardian angels," I referred to the weeklong July trip as a "miracle" even before I boarded the plane. I went to the descendants because I needed to "see" Margaret as clearly as I could her mistress. Family lore is where I began to exhume her. All of the Kelley women I met are fine-looking. Mary Mireault, the niece who at the time looked after Miss Kelley, is a grandmother with rosy cheeks and a warm energy. When I first met her cousin Eleanor Evans, the family historian, I not only recognized a handsome resemblance to Margaret Maher and Tom Kelley but I sensed a quietly assured competence and wry humor that I instantly understood as traits Emily Dickinson came to rely on in Mrs. Evans' Irish immigrant ancestors.

Miss Kelley recalled a first meeting with her great Aunt Mag as occurring when she was eight years old and her aunt was eighty. James Kelley purchased an ice cream cone for his daughter to give to her great-aunt, whom she remembers, with chagrin, eating it with relish. In her last days at Kelley Square, Margaret was cared for by her niece Nell Kelley. The stories passed down are of Nell's

tender ministrations to her aunt's hair. Margaret was fond of beautiful things; Miss Kelley remembered in particular the shawls her aunt accumulated. They were pricey items for which working-class girls in the nineteenth century saved up.[14] Following the cookies and interview, Miss Kelley drove me back to my lodgings on North Prospect, just across the narrow road from a grey clapboard house where long ago her great-aunt untacked carpets and cleaned windows for Clarinda Boltwood before she ended up in the Dickinson kitchen. It was a hot July night even after a soaking rain and we had the windows of her red Ford Fairlane rolled all the way down. At midnight we set to talking about her grandmother who had attended every Amherst Irish woman in labor. At eighty Miss Kelley was twice my age with twice my looks. She wouldn't agree to see me until she'd made time to have her hair done. Life has a way of working out, she said, while insects trilled in dripping foliage. Even the torn edges to my own, she confirmed, would come right.

Descendant stories convinced me of Margaret's sustained presence in the poet's life and this was corroborated by her family's eyewitness accounts. And when I turned to Emily Dickinson's manuscripts, I discovered that they underscored this evidence. Poems were drafted on tradesmen bills, the reverse of recipes—materials close to hand when spending time kitchen-side. Even when the poet could have been relieved of the burdens of nineteenth-century domesticity, she remained "below stairs" for portions of each day, baking and writing. By equating gifts of poetry with other household exchange, she united her work as an artist with her work within the family's everyday life. Like the artisan life largely eroding by Emily's adult years—where home and workshop were under one roof—she valorized the hearth as an authoritative, voluble, and generative site. If, as a critic commented, art registers the "messy vitality of the world," Emily identified that world as the household.[15]

Although Emily Dickinson's letters speak of servants I was at a loss to know the rhythm of their days. More than once, poring over her correspondence, I declared aloud, "why can't she just say who did the laundry?" In frustration I turned to studies about nineteenth-century service, advice books aimed at servants, servants' memoirs, and household guides such as Lydia Maria Child's *The American Frugal Housewife* that was apparently a Homestead "bible." These were the building blocks I used to help frame and construct the Maher-Dickinson story. Digging was necessary; domestic service is of an especial invisibility. It defies history. Rather than leave a trace, each day a maid wipes away marks left. Although "a tailor's workroom or a smithy's workshop could be visibly eloquent of labor, the domestic labor of women—the major source of women's employment in the nineteenth century—suffered one of the most successful vanishing acts of modern history" comments historian Anne McClintock. Work buckets, brooms, and scuttles were banished to back hallways, she notes, hidden from

view and from the zones of leisure: the front hall, parlor, dining room, and library. That is where elite and middle-class "life" was on display.[16] As Victorians began demanding class separations, architecture complied. The kitchen hearth was removed from the center of the home to a separate wing, which only increased the invisibility of those laboring in sculleries. Examining floor plans, I saw how, with the 1855 renovations to the Dickinson family Homestead, it became easier to enter the new kitchen wing from the yard than to pass through the three doors and passageways from the family parlor. Dickinson headquartered in the kitchen was more reachable by peddlers and stablemen than by her Yankee peers.

I am alive – because
I am not in a Room –
The Parlor – commonly – it is –
So Visitors may come –
(FP 605)

When I turned to studying the poet's periods of literary productivity I discovered that when the family employed a maid, Emily wrote more. There was a sharp upswing in her creative production after the first long-term permanent maid, Margaret O'Brien, was hired in about 1856. For the next nine years the poet steadily turned out some one hundred to three hundred poems a year. With Margaret O'Brien's departure, Emily's output dropped to ten poems the next year. Manuscript scholars thought her great poetic "drive was spent."[17] I determined that the numbers stayed similarly low for three and a half years of intermittent maids until Margaret Maher was wooed to the household in 1869. For the rest of her life with the second Margaret (whom the family took to calling "Maggie") until her final illness in 1884, Emily steadily averaged about seventy-five poems and letters per year. Having a permanent maid created opportunity that enabled Emily to identify herself as a poet.

This discovery made my questions morph. I was curious if Adrienne Rich's claim about women being muse, model, and helpmate for the male artist might find a correspondence in the maid for a female writer (on the premise that housework is traditionally women's work).[18] And I found Emily's choice for her pallbearers—six Irish Homestead workmen—to be noteworthy and not even critically discussed in anything on the poet's life. There were many reasons for taking a look at who made it possible for Emily Dickinson to so strongly influence a newly emerging American poetics. The fact that I was an American woman writer having grown up downriver, an Irish Catholic in Yankee New England, was one of the more compelling reasons. By re-entwining the stories of immigrant maid with New England writer, I was creating that sought lineage.

Could the invisibility of the Emily Dickinson I was seeing be explained through her servants' class and cultural invisibility? One of the reasons for domestic workers' light-and-shadow existence is that they are meant to be visible in order to confirm hierarchy and privilege but expected to be invisible so as not to threaten the power balance.[19] That was the case at the Homestead: when cross-examined in an 1897 lawsuit, Lavinia testified that she never employed "help." When the surprised lawyer rephrased his question, she implored, "does he mean Maggie?"[20]

There... and not there. If Lavinia wasn't sure, what should the biographer make of the servants? Did the general fear of and attraction to Catholics or Yankee abhorrence of the Irish, Chinese, Africans, and Indians play a role in constructing a Dickinson narrative devoid of them? How much had to do with race and how much was about class? That the poet conflates the two suggested to me that she wasn't alone in this conundrum. Her contemporary Mabel Loomis Todd found, in a Boston transformed by immigration, that a "lady" didn't exist in that city; everyone looked to her as though they belonged over a washtub.[21] While Todd edited the first edition of Emily's poems, Margaret Maher leaned over Todd's washtub for months at a time, assigned to it without salary. In her few comments about Margaret Maher, manuscript scholar and biographer Theodora Ward likened her to an "awkward but faithful watchdog."[22] Were these improvements over the comments of Ralph Waldo Emerson—that Maher may have been "privileged" to hear while waiting on him in his cousin Fanny Boltwood's house—who described Indian and Irish people as "semi-brutes"?[23] Did these prevalent perspectives of those writing "our" American history leak into the scholarship?

a letter is
a joy of Earth –
it is denied
the gods –
(FP 1672B)

On a late April afternoon 130 years after they were written while wet snow drifted to an apron of bright grass outside the history room I read Margaret Maher's letters. For a week in spring 1996, courtesy of a generous grant, I was immersed in nineteenth-century village life as revealed in an active correspondence among Lucius Manlius, his wife Clarinda, and mother Fanny Boltwood. These were part of the Burton Historical Collection at the main public library in Detroit, Michigan. I had been anxious to go to Detroit because I found errors made in microfilming Margaret's two dozen letters. I had no idea that I would find this maid mentioned in nearly every Boltwood letter of the hundreds I read.

Where Emily's writings are silent on so many aspects of managing household life and leave much to be conjectured, the Boltwood letters reveal mountains of detail that bring nineteenth-century household life and Margaret Maher into sharp focus. From those pages she is luminous as a young woman with a strong sense of self, ethics, and determination. It wasn't until I combed the Boltwood papers in Detroit that I understood why two leading Amherst families fought over her and how she became vital to Emily Dickinson.

Margaret's existence has proved illusory in the public record; Her employers' voluminous correspondence and meticulous records were essential to filling in so many silences in her story, gaps that even her Maher-Kelley descendants couldn't reconcile. By looking at the intimate class and cultural divide from *both* sides, I was able to reconstruct Margaret's and Emily's lives. This is what Darlene Clark Hine calls "crossover history."[24] If first my interest was in locating the contours of Margaret's existence as a way of constructing my lineage as a writer, I soon learned that this search would render more fully the story of her employers—and history itself.

Luckily, Margaret's letters, written over a five-year period (1867–71), managed to survive the many and complicated moves the Boltwood family made between Amherst, Washington, Goshen, Hartford, New Haven, and Grand Rapids. Buried in parcels—lashed to coach, rail car, and steamer—a half-century later the letters were safely deposited in the Detroit Free Public Library. Unlike this maid's subsequent employer, the Boltwoods did not leave directions for destruction of their effects. They took a more public route by willing their life's materials for accession to the Burton Historical Collection. That decision now makes it possible to envision the Boltwood children handling scissors and pencils for the first time.

Unlike the poet, who is known to have written on whatever came to hand, from chocolate-bar wrappers to used envelopes, a much poorer Margaret purchased folded and lined stationary for a series of letters penned to Clarinda Boltwood and sons George, "Lutty" (Lucius), and baby Charley. She wrote these letters when she was separated from the Boltwoods, caring for her own kin or working for Lucius Manlius in Amherst when his wife and children were with her parents in the hill town of Goshen or extended family in Vermont. In one letter she appears so overwrought she repeats "Dear Mrs. Boltwood" three times on three different pages of the same letter. Her handwriting, though it varies, is distinct. When full of ebullient feelings it grows large, especially when signing off and appending emphatic declarations of love. Upset, her script is small, terse, sometimes jagged. A certain dignified essence comes through. On my last day at the archives I read all of her letters again. It was a moment of grace to have Margaret's personality come alive in my hands, to hold what she held. I jotted: "A woman with another woman's feelings on paper. The ink faded to

brown, thick paper, thicker than this. One more evidence of her in my hand."[25]

Before I left the archives I was inspired to read the Burton Collection's own correspondence from the 1940s and 1950s. That's when I learned how Margaret's letters had been found. From perusing the catalog of manuscripts at Columbia University, graduate student Josephine Pollitt (Pohl) learned that the Burton Collection in Detroit had the best material on Amherst outside the town. She had already published a biography of Dickinson in 1930 and was hoping to learn more about the poet's father, Edward, through Boltwood correspondence or Amherst College records. On her visit to the collection in the summer of 1942 Pollitt made a more important discovery. In that vast family correspondence she located letters written by a maid who would leave the Boltwoods intending to seek her fortune in California. Diverted by a series of family crises, she instead found employment in the Dickinson Homestead where she remained for thirty years. After her visit Pollitt wrote on August 9 with excitement to the archivist:

> I paused with keen anticipation over some letters written by Margaret Maher, "Maggie," the Boltwood family servant, because she went from them to the Dickinson family in 1869. The letters in the Boltwood Collection, which came to my attention, were written in 1867, 1868 and 1869. They are quite domestic, and for my purposes would not be of interest in entirety, perhaps; but they do show Maggie's warm, heart-felt devotion to the family that she served, and sometimes her Celtic fancy. Maggie comes alive, definitely.[26]

Pollitt was as electrified by Maher's existence as I would be fifty years later. Within two months she had made the decision to "write a biographical memoir of Miss Maher, in connection with [her] study of the imagery of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and its sources."[27] Interrupted by war she did not write again until November 1951 to schedule a December visit. When she learned that a "young man" would also visit the library in December to peruse the same materials she determined to delay her visit for later in the winter. The young man was Jay Leyda, who had received a Guggenheim award to create for Dickinson's life a volume similar to his *Melville Log*. This became *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, published in 1960 in two volumes by Yale University Press (and now

unfortunately out of print). Eighty-one-year-old Fanny Boltwood of Goshen—whom Margaret Maher had cooed over in her babyhood—informed Leyda of the important Boltwood papers deposited in Detroit. The Maher letters would so captivate him that he immediately put pen to paper. His beautiful tribute, "Miss Emily's Maggie," was out in print just over a year after his reading the letters in Detroit for the first time.

In the world of Dickinson studies Jay Leyda is an important if obscure figure. Manuscript scholar Thomas Johnson and biographer Richard Sewall relied on his judgment. Sewall called him "a great man."[28] It was Leyda who cataloged all of the Dickinson material in the Amherst College Library's Special Collections and the related Todd-Bingham papers at Yale. He seems to have been everywhere, talking to everyone, digging up minutiae for his daily Dickinson log and relaying crucial findings to other scholars. He holds a quirky and key place of his own in the unfolding of the Dickinson narrative. Leyda was part of a new generation, with Johnson, creating a revolution in Dickinson studies that gathered momentum after the 1943 death of the poet's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the last of the line.

In 1951 Josephine Pollitt Pohl deferred to Leyda and to Johnson's "revolution." Her work soon fell into obscurity. When she died in 1978, most of her papers were donated with her husband's effects to Amherst College from which he graduated in 1911. There was one item he held onto: a manuscript written by his wife that Frederick Pohl had intentions of getting into print. Letters to his second wife, widow Loretta Baker Pohl, and an antiquarian book dealer enabled me to find the slender nine-page, typed, double-spaced article "Emily Dickinson—Loaf Giver." Impelled by a maid's evocative letters, this appears to be Pollitt Pohl's planned "biographical memoir of Miss Maher," or its first installment; it is printed for the first time in this volume.

Acknowledging the domestic and aural space of the Homestead kitchen this brief and lovely piece supported my contention that the work of the kitchen and those who populated that space had impact on the language and form of Dickinson's poetry. Pollitt Pohl compares Dickinson poems to the brevity of family recipes and considers that her slant rhymes in the mouths of "Miss Imlay's" servants are perfect rhymes. All of this confirmed my independent experience of the poems when I made my way through them one wet January. Reading Dickinson's opus chronologically for the first time, my ear's attention was snagged by lines like "A Thought went up my mind / today" (FP 731) and "Lest Firmament should fail / for me – / The Rivet in the Bands" (FP 189). The syntax sounded familiar to me, homelike, as if it came from the mouths of my elders, had been infused with Hiberno-English; a variety created from the collision of the Irish language and English. Pollitt Pohl appears to have been influenced by another early biographer, Genevieve Taggard, who was perhaps the first to acknowledge

in print that the poet was attuned to servant speech. She wrote in 1930 that "Maggie Mahar's Irish speech pleased Emily's ear; it had flavour."[29]

I was buoyed by Taggard's and Pollitt Pohl's insights; they propelled me. Their studies confirmed my suspicions that conversation in general, especially with servants whose language backgrounds were different from the poet's, informed her ear and helped explain her unusual language gestures. The varieties of English she was privy to throughout her writing life provided sinew, fortification, and inexhaustible variety to someone listening for the invisible. In the "combustible space" of the kitchen, maid's and mistress's lives and languages rubbed off on each other. As I began sharing these tentative findings, similar ones began arriving as gifts. Frances Mayes told me that at times, especially when tired, Black English creeps back into her speech despite the intervening years since her Georgia upbringing where she was raised, like Faulkner, by an African American nanny. Tillie Olsen recalled her 1960s visit to the Emily Dickinson Room at Harvard with Theodora Ward when they discussed servants and Ward's claim that the poet was strongly influenced by their Irish speech. Brought close to the poet through editing her manuscripts and as a granddaughter of Emily's friends, Elizabeth and Josiah Holland, Ward had an intimate sense of her as a fellow Yankee.

I went looking for more and learned how influential were the servants on Yeats's grandparents' Sligo farm both their enthralling fairy-lore and their language, which affected Yeats's own.[30] Or how the fierce language of John Millington Synge's plays was intimately bound up with his sense of place from the time spent on Aran learning Irish.[31] Beckett wrote his plays immersed in the textures of French. Gertrude Stein, whose mother tongue was German, appears to have reheard English later in life through the appealing rhythms of the Alsatian dialect.[32] When asked about the source of his poetic influences, Robert Creeley mentioned the speech and habits of his Maine people—primarily the five women with whom he grew up—but he points to another crucial figure in the household, Theresa Turner, their immigrant housekeeper from County Cork: "so in terms of language habits it would be hard to sort out the various influences . . . how would one factor her in?"[33] Creeley admits that in emotional moments he finds himself increasingly returning to the language of his childhood, relating that, on Theresa's day off, the housekeeper would take the young Creeley to visit her:

> old-time friends, all the classic old-time Irish families, most of them very poor, and it was intensely and terrifically emotional. I mean the father would cry a lot, there'd be lots of hugging—lots of physical touching and emotion which our family didn't avoid, but we just didn't have it as a habit, and certainly the other company of the town didn't have it. I don't think one

characteristically saw one's elders either embracing or showing much emotion of any kind. So this Irish pattern in the town was great.[34]

Excited that I was on to something, I wrote to biographer Richard Sewall in Bethany, Connecticut. He expressed delight that I was "exploring a topic (and there are many others) that [he] couldn't get to in detail."[35] Our correspondence even elicited several language theories that never made it to print; his own as well as those told to him by Dickinson's neighbor (and later scholar) Millicent Todd Bingham.

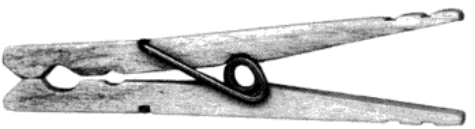
We talked as Girls do –
Fond, and late –
(FP 392)

These stories shared struck me as much by content as by medium. So little was written down in this vein or had lain unpublished for decades like Pollitt Pohl's essay. Seismic shifts in Dickinson studies following Johnson's landmark publications in the 1950s meant that previously published books like Pohl's and Taggard's, however insightful their parts, were abandoned. Bianchi, the poet's niece, published *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* in 1932, detailing her remembrances of life with her aunt and family stories gleaned. Though she was considered an unreliable source by Richard Sewall and Millicent Todd Bingham (especially as folks lined up on either side of Austin Dickinson's extramarital affair), in Bianchi's slim volume she affords an everyday sense of the poet that glows with life. Together with the findings of Pollitt Pohl, Leyda, and Taggard, and my interviews with servant descendants, a fleshed-out poet emerges. These aurally saved contributions wedge open a suggestion of dailiness, of lives shared across class and race and culture under that gabled roof. I found myself piecing together an alternative Emily through conversation and inquiry, the way families pass their stories in a media mix of oft-repeated tales, news clippings, milestone documents, and saved artifacts that are alive with meaning. A story had gone missing; *this* Emily was under the radar.

Domestic intelligence of the poet's household contributed to the evocations by Pollitt Pohl, Taggard, Bianchi, Bingham, and Leyda. For them, her life lived was a short generation away. They were aided no doubt by the insights, stories recounted, and writings of sister-in-law Susan, sister Lavinia, editor Mabel Loomis Todd, friend Elizabeth Holland, cousins Francis and Louisa Norcross, and cousins Clara and Anna Newman. What they didn't know about servants or failed to see or say was rendered in memorable images passed down and held onto by servant descendants including Eleanor Evans, Mary Favolise, Mary Fitzgibbon, Punky Fleck, Roberta George, Catherine Kelley, Patricia Kelley

Leftwich, Judith Marshall, Sheliah Moran, and Bob Viara. Servants, relatives, and neighbors not only saw Emily working as a writer but were part of the conversations with and around her; what might be referred to as a particularly female oral tradition that scholar Elizabeth Hoban says came to be denigrated.[36] Susan Dickinson in her tribute coda to her sister-in-law located the poet within the "home circle" of family, friends and servants where "so simple and strong was her instinct that a woman's hearthstone is her shrine."[37] This circle of people were keeping alive a counternarrative of an Emily fully vested in the kitchen.

A photograph took me to a Detroit archive, returned me to the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts and eventually sent me over the ocean to the "Mountain of the Women" in the Irish countryside. While my public debt was to Jay Leyda, for having made it to print with his groundbreaking article, an older debt was to a series of primarily women "biographers," part of the written and oral traditions, who prepared the soil. Key to this was Josephine Pollitt Pohl who in the summer of 1942 first unearthed the Maher documents in a Detroit library and who implicitly understood the importance of the kitchen sphere. Pollitt Pohl easily imagined the bright yellow and green sunlit kitchen with its eastern door standing open in fine weather to the Dickinson garden. Upon reading hundreds of Boltwood letters, Pollitt Pohl looked at her life one hundred years later, as I did mine, to understand the correspondences between domestic concerns and the content and shape of Emily Dickinson's writing.



My silkscreened aprons hung on a clothesline; small bundles of "poems" tied with twine spilled from a trunk; a cutlery drawer held strips of language and the golden scent of drying marigolds. I turned to visual work when language wasn't precise enough and I learned to silkscreen and make public art to capture the notion of silence and voice girding this Maher-Dickinson story. The silkscreened ironing boards created for my life-sized kitchen tableau were a paean to Tillie Olsen for her story "I Stand Here Ironing"—but even more for her book *Silences*. I silkscreened a kitchen table with an old Irish text overlaid with Margaret Maher's writing overlaid with Emily Dickinson's. To this table I added the material artifacts of a Catholic woman's daily life—teapot, handkerchief, coins, Mass cards, rosary beads, spoon, sugar bowl—everyday definitional objects. I wanted these objects to speak out of that silence. They did.

When I saw my "Pantry DRAWer" installed in an exhibition I understood something I hadn't quite before. Now it was palpable. My years of research

hadn't spoken so clearly. Bandy-legged from an overnight flight I stood before my work in the museum's grey emptiness. I heard and saw how impossibly noisy, dense with motion and language the kitchen is—especially the Dickinsons' nineteenth-century one. I understood my investigation as much richer than simply silence and voice: that the poet had immersed herself to write in a cacophonous tumbling kitchen "world" was inescapable. Josephine Pollitt Pohl was exactly on the mark when she wrote: "A recipe, in the nineteenth century, was a formula for a remedy, a cake, an explosion."

> Silence is all
> we dread.
> There's Ransom
> in a Voice –
> But Silence
> is Infinity.
> Himself have
> not a face.
> (FP 1300B)

But the plot thickened the deeper I looked. Perhaps it always does. In recovering the names of perhaps eighty permanent and temporary servants working over the course of the poet's lifetime between her's and her brother's house—depending on the season, anywhere from two to a half dozen at a time—I found another variety of English spoken at hearth and barn in her girlhood. It was formed of Native peoples' and African languages mixed with English vernaculars. There was an invisible story within an invisible story. Amherst History Museum director Melinda LeLecheur was told by his descendant that Native American townsman Henry Hawkins had worked for the Dickinsons. She located this descendant for me to interview. Conversations with genealogical historian James Avery Smith as well as his book about Amherst's early African American population helped me figure out that stableman Jeremiah Holden, gardener Amos Newport, stableman Wells Newport, housekeeper Mrs. Scott, laborer Charles Thompson, gardener Henry Hawkins, and domestic worker Eliza Thompson were among the Native and African Americans employed by the Dickinson family. There were probably many more.

I was astounded. If there was any awareness of Dickinson servants, the understanding was that they were Irish. The story suddenly got much more interesting. When I created a servant timeline, something even newer riveted my attention: by the early 1850s the African American servants, either through attrition, preference, or both, were largely replaced by English and Irish immigrants. It was a tumultuous time, full of extraordinary upheaval, racial shifts, and class

consolidation. Edward Dickinson restored the family's wealth and position expressing that gain through reclamation and extensive remodeling of the family Homestead that had been lost by his father more than twenty years earlier. The poet's reactions to both were on my mind and made me more watchful of how Emily did or did not mention Indians and Africans and of her response to the hot topics of slavery, abolitionism, and the Civil War (1861–65). I have found no traces of the poet drawing so emotionally close to her African or Native American servants as she did to Tom Kelley and Margaret Maher. That in itself seems a function of her racism. Nevertheless these new discoveries were suggestive (like Dickinsonian oral history that withered and lay dormant with the accretion of time) of what Ralph Ellison refers to as history's two versions: the written and the unwritten. Despite what is left out of the record the "unwritten history looms as its obscure alter ego . . . always active in the shaping of events."

> We miss your vivid face and the besetting Accents
> (JL 438)

Margaret Maher wrote in conflicting ways about home. After leaving a country beset with starvation, migration, and mass evictions, she supported herself by living as a servant under other people's roofs. It took her fifty years to get "home" to Kelley Square tucked on the east flank of the Dickinson meadow. I followed her back to the original home in County Tipperary on what the Irish describe as a "soft day" and what New Englanders call "drizzling." The Golden Vale is a swath of fertile country by the River Anner, the lands of Ballypatrick and Sliabh na mBán (Mountain of the Women). To the west lies Margaret's probable birthplace, the village of Killusty, now its churchyard at a curve in the road. On the north face, Killurney farmhouses hug a slope above Kilcash where Tom Kelley once roamed with his brothers. After three days of listening to voices in the byways of Tipperary, I knew how lucky Emily was to have this language make its home in hers.

From the medieval walls behind P. J. Lonergan's pub in the town of Fethard it is possible to take a long view across the Vale to Sliabh na mBán (in a nostalgic ballad, the Valley of Sweet Slievenamon). This is where I found myself contemplating the headwaters of Emily Dickinson's "long summons into the vocation of poetry."[38] South Tipperary is a countryside so ample with poets and scholars that some nineteenth-century farmers were known to converse in Latin and Greek and to study Irish manuscripts by candlelight. For many hundreds of years the literary sensibility has been honed and made rich as the soil of the Golden Vale itself. It was from here on the slopes of "The Mountain of the Women" that the Mahers of Killusty and Kelleys (spelled Kelly in Ireland) from Killurney made their way at midcentury to Amherst, "a city on a hill."

Margaret appears to have been a really good match for Emily, as much a soulmate as a servant. My guide to South Tipperary, Colonel Eoghan ÓNeill (who had grown up in the next parish over) intimated as much when I telephoned him in Wicklow to make arrangements for the visit to "South Tipp." "I don't consider myself expert in her poetry," he commented in his clipped style, "but she seemed to write a great deal about nature." The Kelleys and Mahers were country people, he reminded me, and would have had an abiding sense of the natural world. Knowing the long literary tradition in South Tipperary I understood that at some level there was a meeting of minds in the Homestead kitchen. Life in the Golden Vale probably resembled the agrarian rhythms so important in the poet's youth, when time was orchestrated by the natural world and not the bellwhistle urgency of the market. Margaret and Emily spoke the same language, one that proved essential to the writer's art.

To pile like
Thunder to
it's close
Then crumble
grand away
While everything
created hid
This – would
be Poetry –

Or Love – the
two coeval come –
We both and
neither prove –
Experience either
and consume –
For none see
God and live –
(FP 1353)

When the sky had the low-hugging gray cast of New England winter, I drove east from Hartford to rural central Connecticut to meet Roberta George. I was welcomed into her life because at the funeral of her grandmother, Roberta had felt a sensation like a fluttering of wings and the word "Remember." The plan was to digitize her grandmother's pictures before the images were further ghosted by time. Her sixteen-year-old daughter Giovanna made me passion-fruit tea while we talked and I looked out at a red barn on snowy ground in a

wood of reed-slender trunks. Soon Diane and Tim Nighswander and their Hasselblad camera were crowded over pictures of students from one-room Enfield schoolhouses and Henry Hawkins's daughters, Emma and Henrietta, magisterial in peacock chairs. A goodly piece of Massachusetts and Connecticut African American history materialized before us—something Roberta has been chasing down for years. Genealogical charts of the intermarrying of the Hicks, Hawkins, Pettijohn, Moore, Mundle, and Baskerville families lay open on Roberta's dining room table. "Hicks and Baskerville are two old African American Connecticut names" she explained.[39] Silently I mourned that I couldn't capture all for this book with its narrow focus on Dickinson servants. Perhaps a different book is emerging, I mused, as I turned the pages of family history binders and took notes.

The story was getting more complicated. The working-class people that Emily claimed, in her early twenties, not to want to visualize were everywhere evident

in her poems and letters. They figured in the broader landscape and as confidants at bedside and stove. And while Emily eventually let the Irish ones—like Margaret Maher, Tom Kelley, and Stephen Sullivan—into her intimate circle, the Native and African American servants were still around. While she might have shrunk from the "new Black man" (JL 721) setting out peonies in 1881, reason would have it that Roberta's ancestors, Mary and (William) Henry Hawkins and his second wife's parents, Charles and Eliza Thompson, were putting in their days at the Homestead and College on and off throughout Emily's adult life. With her father and then brother as college treasurer, college business was family business. I began to see how prominent a figure Charles Thompson cut in town. For decades he loomed large for every college student who stepped foot on campus. But before the students even got to campus, African American teamster Henry Jackson or his son moved them in, trucking their goods from railhead or sleepy hill town. Henry Hawkins, like his father-in-law Charles, worked as a college janitor, stoking the boiler and maintaining the grounds. Thompson, and likely Hawkins, served as an unthreatening sort of authority figure, keeping college student pranks within safe bounds. It would seem that these Native and African American men of the town moved folks safely through on the Underground Railroad, given Henry Jackson's prominent role in saving and hiding one little girl in a famous 1840 case. Henry Hawkins used that route to send his Native wife, barefoot and in tatters after escaping from Virginia slavery, to Amherst.

Although it had appeared initially to me that immigrants, both Irish and English, had taken the jobs of local African Americans at midcentury, as I was in the final stages of putting this book together, I became less sure that they left the Homestead so completely. When Emily's racism flashed in the early 1880s, did it obscure who worked in and around the Homestead? The Irish had assumed key jobs and a Yankee had taken over the grounds from Amos Newport, an elderly African American man. But Emily would have still heard her father speaking with "Professor Charley," whom she had known for decades, or his wife who, without fail, served at their annual commencement fete, the summer social rite. Eliza Thompson must have been in and out of the Homestead kitchen, catering to guests spread about the lawns, mopping their brows in the sultry afternoon. So entwined with the day-to-day dealings of provincial elites like the Dickinsons and active in the shaping of the town's events, they were the "obscure alter ego" in a barely written history.[40] It was the penetrating gaze of one maid and what feels like serendipity that helped me see this wider and more varied terrain. Thus, Margaret Maher and Tom Kelley become signature figures for their colleagues, those even more invisible who nevertheless were there.

In her 1971 *Art News* essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Linda Nochlin concludes that the answer "lies not in the nature of indi-

vidual genius or lack of it, but in the nature of given social institutions and what they forbid or encourage in various classes or groups of individuals." It is the "total situation of art making"[41] that I hope to play up in this volume and how Emily turned what may be seen as social constrictors into ingredients for artistic freedom. By restoring some of the social context of maids and laborers, my intent is to look at how art is made and with what materials; to re-situate the work, as Walter Benjamin would have it, in its aura, its original magic.[42]

While highlighting the relationship between maid and mistress, I bring Margaret's life and longings into focus. I chart the positive significance of a servant presence on the poet's productivity and how that and the social whirl caused the Dickinson sisters to rebel against housework. What occurred "downstairs" over time and who was there with her, wiping plates, milking cows, and gathering quince, is part of the tale. In time the poet appears to have adopted the kitchen as a generative site—especially after Margaret's firm establishment in

that household. Emily's writing suggests influence by her servants' Hiberno-English and African American Vernacular English (the term linguists use for Black English); indeed, that she even adopted some of their linguistic and social strategies devised under duress. In being drawn to the kitchen, the poet was afforded a lifetime of close associations with poor people, observing how they coped with tragedy and responded to joy. This intimacy seems to have improved some of her attitudes—so much so that six laborers she knew well bore her to the grave. It was either a final snub to the town or a gesture acknowledging these men's roles in her life (or both); perhaps it made explicit that "neither lives nor masterpieces are single or solitary births."[43]

A photograph led me "home" to my predecessors: Josephine Pollitt Pohl, Genevieve Taggard, Tillie Olsen, Theodora Ward, Catherine Kelley, Eleanor Evans, Anna Scannell, Millicent Todd Bingham, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, and Jay Leyda. It was the outcome of many years of our *thinking in common* that allowed me to find the people who freed Emily Dickinson to write, supplied her with neighborhood "intelligence," kept her Yankee peers at bay, inflected her ear, informed her writing practice, influenced her attitudes, were her sought companions, and saved her poems from destruction. At one edge of life they swaddled her. At the other they wrapped her in white flannel again and carried her according to her wishes to the grave.

When taboos are broken—as when a wealthy white Protestant Yankee chooses six poor Irish Catholic laborers for her pallbearers—there is something to be gained by looking in those cleavings.

"Mind the gap" is the message train and subway riders read dozens of times a week as they step from platform to car and back. It's what readers of poetry are mindful of or hungry for; the more astonishing the leaps the reader must make,

the more one feels, as Emily did, as if her whole head were being taken off. That was her litmus test as to what was poetry. What a writer doesn't say, the meaning she folds into those unarticulated gaps, is ever-present for readers; the space between the said and unsaid is what excites. So too in life, or certainly in the life of someone like Emily Dickinson, who took her poetic strategies and practice into daily living and back. With her it would be wise to look at meaning-laden connections in everything she authored, from quince jam to piano melodies, let alone lyrics and her own funeral.

In this book I find myself regarding the "dangerous and intimate region of the unsaid," as Kathleen Fraser puts it, and that back and forth in meaning that African Americans (and Emily) know so well as "signifying."[44] I've pondered what Emily and her servants created and the negative space surrounding it; the unseen. I've listened for what Margaret Maher and Emily Dickinson might have said to each other and what they heard, the texture of silence and voice and the delicious tension of what almost passes from lips, what's scored on the page. I've tried to examine where these two women, maid and mistress, stood and looked out at their world and at the objects of their gaze. What did Emily take in when she alighted on the portrait studio chair as a precocious Amherst belle? What did Margaret and her colleagues take into the iris of their eyes the afternoon they were refracted through J. Lovell's lens? Isn't it there that our story begins?

1

Warm and Wild and Mighty

Drifts of new snow and deep ruts, wagons turning Main Street the color of cinnamon sugar, weren't obstacles the morning Edward Dickinson set out across the village of Amherst, Massachusetts. A satin stocking around his neck (held with a diamond pin), a glossy black beaver hat, and his determined posture were familiar village sights.[1] *To whatever the Squire did, he applied the whole of his being. This was something his elder daughter, Emily, both emulated and used to her advantage. In fact, she was largely the reason he was headed first along Prospect Street to Mrs. Talcott's and not to his law office. On a February morning in 1869 the Squire clomped up the wooden steps, stamped the snow from his boots, and knocked.*

Twenty-seven-year-old Margaret Maher, an immigrant from County Tipperary, was rearranging tortoiseshell combs in her unruly dark hair. She heard the knock and adjusted a freshly starched apron over her calico-print dress. A check in the hall mirror confirmed how the fabric made her eyes appear a deeper blue. With the new hair combs from her sister, she might yet be the belle of Palmer or, better still, San Francisco. It wouldn't be long, she thought, before she boarded the ship for the halfway point, Panama, where her brother would be waiting. "I think I won't feel lonesome," Margaret breathed aloud, imagining handsome Michael craning his neck as he searched for her at the crowded deck rails.[2] *"I am very fortunate in my plans," she mused, imagining brother and sister at last setting sail for new lives in California.*[3] *A few more months, she sighed, and opened the outer door.*

"Morning, Squire, please come in. I'll go up for Mrs. Talcott."

But Edward didn't want Mrs. Talcott. He wanted her, and blurted, "When are you finished here?"

"As soon as the end of this month, Squire sir."

He hired her on the spot and gave her an advance as quick as that to seal it. The deed accomplished, he adjusted his stocking scarf and set off down Maple Avenue for his law office. The sun was brilliant and causing the snow on Pleasant Street to break up under sleds and foot traffic. Town was in motion

and soon his household would be on course. He nodded. His wife and daughters would be pleased.

For Margaret's part, the arrangement easily solved the problem of where another month's wages were coming from. She had no idea that this stop-gap position was a matter of conflict and competition among the leading households of Amherst. Margaret planned to quit the Dickinson job at the beginning of April 1869 to get everything ready for her departure on May 1—an auspicious day for those who believed in fairies, more active than usual during the old Irish festival of May 1, Bealtaine. California was an irresistible intoxicant and immigrants, newly sprung from coffin ships, rushed to its gold fields. Margaret's younger brother, Tommy, had set sail five long months ago and she was supposed to have left with him that first Saturday in October 1868. Beset by illness, she remained in Amherst to be nursed by her sister Mary Kelley and doted on by nieces and nephews.

When she was strong enough (for strength was the key ingredient to a life in domestic service), Margaret took on a series of temporary jobs.[4] She did fill-in work for her first employers, the three generations of the Boltwood family, in addition to a few months for Mrs. Talcott and her three school-age children. She'd had to abruptly leave her job with the junior Boltwoods—and their three boys George, Lutty, and baby Charley—when her father became gravely ill in May 1868. Within days of burying her father, her brother-in-law Tom Kelley nearly died. The Saturday after the funeral, he sustained a thirty-foot fall from the roof of the lampblack factory.[5] Barely a year and half before that, they'd buried Margaret and Mary's mother, the thought of which still brought pain. Margaret would likely still be working in the Boltwood home if it weren't for "the will of the lord [inflicting] me with so many troubles as I had I would be in Hartford... where I will always call my home."[6] Now she was headed, after numerous delays, to her brothers in California. She was "lonesome," as she put it, while waiting out the time until her departure.

Lonesome is the word Margaret used for all her disappointments. Growing up in an extended family and community dense with people, being alone and lonesome is hardly descriptive of her predicament. Yet after the ruptures that led to their emigration from Ireland, any inroads to the family circle were acutely felt. Cut loose from her moorings more accurately described her situation. After a number of stable years, when the Maher-Kelley circle only saw increase, the twenty months from October 1866 to June 1868 saw their world turned upside down.

Margaret and her sister Mary nursed Tom around the clock in three-hour shifts, both of them in states of shock and grief. "My dear sister what will she do[;] the father of seven children[.] the lord / may comfort her," a tearful Margaret confided to Clarinda Boltwood with the outcome still grim.[7] Another

upset followed when her brother's engagement broke off. As Tom Kelley revived, Margaret and her younger brother Tommy needed something live and new. With tempting missives arriving from California, they seized on the obvious. While the siblings concocted their plans to join their gold-mining brother Michael, they had little inkling that the Dickinsons had a different plan for Margaret.

Three years before this, Emily Dickinson had been writing a poem a day. When she lost her steady maid of nine or ten years, she all but stopped writing. She knew she needed a dependable maid in order to put aside the soup ladle and pick up her pen. If she was to get any idea of how important Margaret Maher would become to her literary enterprise, it occurred while watching Margaret under pressure as the Boltwoods and Dickinsons staged a many-month tug-of-war over her services. Margaret held her own in the tense negotiations with formidable Yankee lawyers who were more than twice her age. It wasn't a lack of poor and able-bodied women that fueled the contest between the region's two leading families. In the late 1860s there were plentiful numbers of Yankees, Native people, Africans, and immigrants vying for jobs. That this poor twenty-seven-year-old domestic worker was the cause célèbre of their manipulative battle speaks perhaps to a competitiveness fueled by Margaret's character and reputation among the leading parlors. It also said much about the will of Emily Dickinson.

Margaret was to become many things to the "friendly and absolute monarchs, each in his own domain" who reigned in the Dickinson household.[8] Margaret's butter was notably excellent—according to Margaret "the best the[y] ever had"—and sister Lavinia and her plethora of cats were content.[9] Most important, her presence got a working poet back on track. It was only when their relationship deepened that Margaret became more to Emily Dickinson—and ultimately to her readers. Back on that winter morning, in 1869, when Edward went to Mrs. Talcott's in search of Margaret, it was most likely at his elder daughter's behest. She was experiencing urgency, if not desperation, about her writing.

Twinned Serpents

It's the custom to carry a stone in your pocket when climbing Slievenamon, *Sliabh na mBán* in Irish, and leave it at a cairn on the mountaintop.

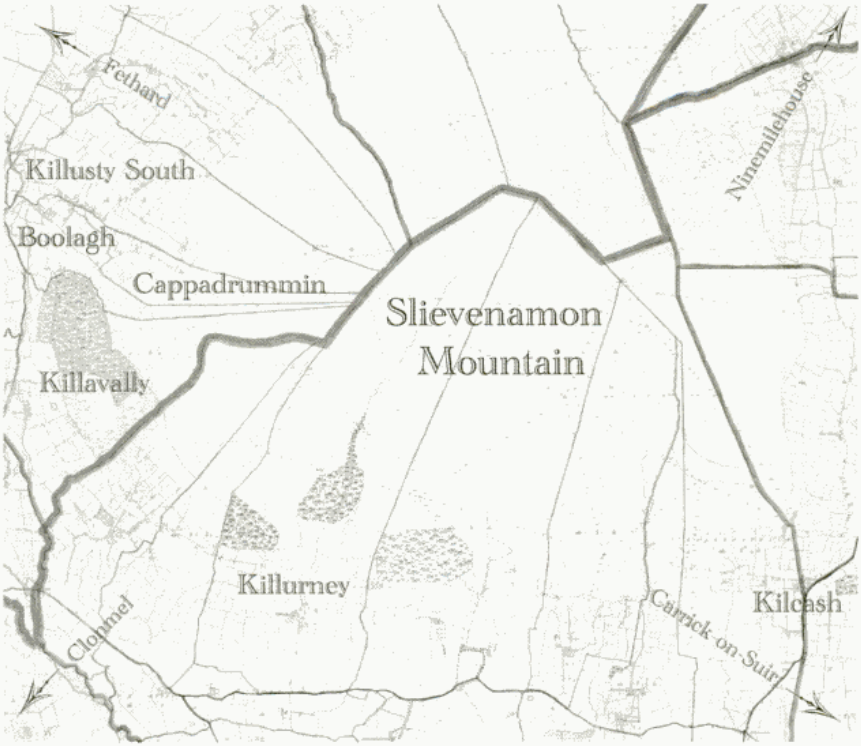
When Margaret Maher and her sister laid down their last stones on the summit of Slievenamon in South Tipperary, surely a "soft" day with fog like a sweater you pull into yourself, Margaret could not have foretold what awaited her in America. All the sisters knew was that there was no future here. From the top

of the mountain they could spy the River Suir wandering with ample bows some forty miles to Waterford—and not the despair wracked along its banks. Their eyes would have lingered on the brown and green patchwork of the fertile Gleann an Óir, the Golden Vale of Ivowen, too far up to take in mud cabins ghosted by fever, eviction and emigration following the Great Famine that raged from 1845 to 1850.[10]

On closer inspection, the vale looked as if it had been ravaged by war. Although the county lost a quarter of its population, in some townlands (rural clusters of houses) the figures were starker and half the houses were empty. But conditions leading up to the famine were so dire that the potato blight just put the nails in the coffin. Increasing pressures on the arable land (through subdivision and consolidation) and widescale unemployment produced byways full of beggars. Many were too embarrassed to show up in church because their scant clothes were so ragged. Industries once robust suffered when English textiles flooded the market. In Carrick-on-Suir most of the six hundred weavers known to "kick a football on the Green" left their looms for the workhouse.[11]

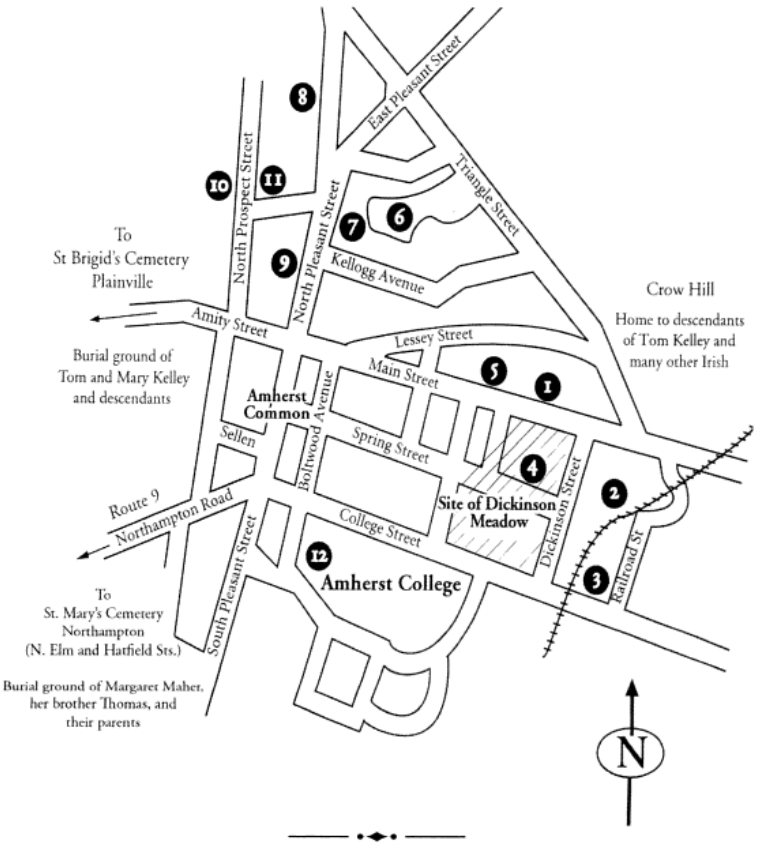
When Michael Maher married Mary Dunne in 1825, they became one of the struggling families moving from townland to townland, from Boolagh to Killavally to Cappadrummin, trying to secure a footing and a future. Child after child was laid in the grave with only four of nine Maher offspring surviving: Mary, Margaret, Michael, and Thomas.[12] Margaret was four and a half years old when the first potato crop failed in autumn 1845. Kiltinan, where the Mahers appear to have settled, lost two-thirds of its potato crop the following year. Half the laborers were idle. In the worst year of the blight, for every birth a curate recorded, there were five deaths. A whole family trundled in bed shared one blanket as the lice hopped between them bearing typhus and cholera.[13] Mothers, with only a little meal and a few charity turnips to share out, pretended to be aunts in order to get their children admitted to the workhouse. Public works—the breaking up of stone or road building—were devised because the authorities couldn't just give starving people food. They made them work for it.[14]

South Tipperary writer Charles Kickham wrote that the "twinned serpents of eviction and emigration" tumbled the "paradise" of his native place. He lamented that the "roofless walls of once happy homes meet me at every turn; and the emigrant ship is still bearing away its freight of sorrow and vengeance."[15] Some landlords—anxious to lower their poor-law tax and get tenants in arrears off the land—found ways to evict them or created incentives to emigrate. That appears to be what happened in Kiltinan, creating the impetus for the Maher family emigration. Word came back that folks in America needn't pay out part of their earnings to barony constables or rate collectors.[16] It was the obvious choice in 1854 when landlord Robert Cooke, Esq., rationalized his holdings.[17]



The midcentury land valuation records for the townlands in and around where his children were born indicate that a Michael Maher was leasing forty-nine good acres from Robert Cooke in an area filled with other Meaghers and Kellys. Unless the entire family was lodging with in-laws, there's a good chance this was Margaret's father.[18] That considerable piece of land would explain why the family had both the money to emigrate and the means to get as far as western Massachusetts when so many poor emigrants couldn't move beyond the rough-and-tumble neighborhoods of America's port cities. Michael Maher had clearly come up in the world. The unstable decade or two preceding 1850, though, had taken its toll. His eldest child by fifteen years, Mary, never managed to get an education and for her entire life signed her name with an X. If there is any sign of family prosperity, it's that the younger daughter, Margaret, got enough time in a classroom so that one day she'd be able to discuss an article read in the Catholic newspaper with Emily Dickinson.

At a moment around 1854, from atop Slievenamon and their hopeful imaginations, America couldn't have looked better. Sisters Margaret and Mary Maher could not have envisioned that a dozen years ahead they would be laying both parents in Massachusetts graves or that those life events would split them up,



1. **The Homestead, 280 Main Street, home of Emily Dickinson's family, 1830–1840 and 1855–1899**
2. **Kelley Square, home of Tom and Mary Kelley's family**
3. **The Lampblack factory, site of Tom Kelley's accident on June 13, 1868**
4. **The Dell, 90 Spring Street, home of David and Mabel Loomis Todd**
5. **The Evergreens, 214 Main Street, home of Austin and Susan Dickinson**
6. **West Cemetary, Emily Dickinson's grave**
7. **Emily Dickinson's Pleasant Street home, 1840–1855 (161 North Pleasant, on present site of a gas station)**
8. **St. Bridget's Church (former), 308 North Pleasant Street, opened doors in March 1871 as the first Catholic church in Amherst (on present site of Cathedral Apartments)**
9. **St. Brigid's Church (current), 122 North Pleasant Street (consecrated in 1926)**
10. **Home of the junior Boltwoods (Lucius Manlius and Clarinda), 62 North Prospect Street**
11. **Talcott home, corner of North Prospect Street and Maple Street (now Cowles Lane)**
12. **Boltwood Mansion, Boltwood Avenue, home of senior Boltwoods (Lucius and Fanny) on present site of Amherst College's Converse Hall**

propelling some of the family westward again. Margaret could not anticipate holding her father in her arms when he exhaled his last breath. Her family attachments were so fierce that there was a story in Amherst circulation that Margaret, after settling in America, left her siblings to again brave the ship-toss of the North Atlantic to claim her mother and father waiting in South Tipperary. This is what Jay Leyda learned from Kelley descendants in the 1940s or early 1950s.[19] That she actually did so is highly unlikely but the story indicates common agreement about her deep allegiances and her formidable pluck.

More likely Margaret was the industrious thirteen-year-old, packing up pots and lovingly convincing her father and mother, in their mid-sixties and mid-fifties, that the whole family must emigrate together. With their lives mostly behind them, narrow and circumscribed by townland life, her parents were surely reluctant but Margaret wasn't going without them and must have argued and pleaded.[20] Not only was she emotionally wedded to the people most important to her but she had a way of calibrating herself to their vulnerabilities, a skill she made ample use of with her American employers Clarinda Boltwood and Emily Dickinson. Clarinda at one point marveled that "Margaret is as kind as a sister could be to me" and it wasn't long before Emily was describing Margaret's temperament as "sensational"; besides strength, personality is what poor girls had to offer.[21] There was that characteristic way her one eyebrow arched and her weak spot for beautiful things; lovely paisley shawls are what her great-niece Catherine would one day recall. Dignified but diplomatic. The girl had a way with her.

With parents convinced and meager belongings packed, would they have faltered at the sight of the Mountain of the Women, rising up brown and bald from the green fields evoking Charles Kickham's famous ballad?

> Oh, sweet Slievenamon, you're my darling and pride,
> With your soft swelling bosom and mien like a bride,
> How oft have I wandered in sunshine and shower,
> From dark Kyleavalla to lonely Glenbower...

There were goodbyes to be made at the churchyard where Mahers, Dunnes, and Laheas had been buried since before anyone could remember. It was to be their last sighting of places like Nine Mile House where William Meagher, to whom they would have been related, owned the Grand Inn.[22] William presided over vibrant literary evenings at the inn as had his father before him. That father, also William, was known for his translations and poetry. He compiled the writings of the most eminent bards of Ireland and published these in a literary magazine, *The Garland of Honeyflowers*, launched by local miller Patrick O'Neill.

The Golden Vale was as fertile for poets as it was for grain and this "undoubtedly had a great effect on the taste and literary interests of the people," commented Eoghan O'Neill, one of Patrick's descendants.[23]

To this unbroken two thousand–year tradition of Irish poetry, and to a place where poets had been so long a part of the aristocratic order, the Mahers were also saying farewell.[24] Down from the flanks of the Mountain of the Women, they looked toward the medieval walls of Fethard, the town where a Maher was schoolmaster. Being encircled by walls, and once guarded by four gates and towers, had enabled it to withstand a siege in the time of Cromwell—but not this unrelenting bleed of its people to ships tied up on the coast.

From the Mountain of the Women to a City on a Hill

Margaret thought the senior Boltwoods were as kind as parents and, while paying her what seemed like a fair price, Lucius and Fanny Boltwood and their eight sons and daughter made her feel welcome as she adjusted to a new life in America.[25] She must have arrived at their porticoed mansion by the mid- to late 1850s. When their oldest, Lucius Manlius, in 1860 married Clarinda Boardman Williams from the nearby hill town of Goshen, and babies started arriving, Margaret was likely reassigned to the junior Boltwoods living not far away on Prospect Street. As need arose in either house, Margaret was easily able to go between both families. She worked as their live-in maid while Lucius Manlius developed the Amherst College library and stayed with the family when new library postings took them to Washington, D.C., and Hartford, Connecticut.

Neither Boltwood household could even imagine life without Margaret. After probably a decade, they had all come to depend upon this hard and steadfast worker whom Clarinda described as "good and faithful."[26] The butter the family oozed over pancakes was what Margaret churned for them from the Boltwood cow. When Ralph Waldo Emerson pounded his cousin Fanny's table over the "semi-brute... shovel-handed Irish," it was Margaret Maher who would have stepped forward to remove the adjacent teacup and saucer before they jilted to the floor.[27] Her acculturation to life in America occurred in their Greek revival mansion overlooking the swampy Amherst Common where cows flicked their tails

by day and geese patrolled through night. Lying in bed, one could hear their abrupt herald when an unsuspecting college student skirted the swamp.

No One Spoke

When Fanny and Lucius Boltwood got wind of Margaret's new assignment with the Dickinsons, they were livid. They had just gone in search of Margaret. They looked for her over by the train depot at "Kelley Square"—where the Maher and Kelley families lived—or at Mrs. Talcott's on Prospect Street. But Margaret didn't know this nor did she know the depth of their outrage. They had been extremely unhappy about her impending "defection" to California. Margaret's departure from their son's Hartford household was viewed in terms of its inconveniencing Boltwood routines, not what boon it might bring to Margaret. They were consumed caring for Fanny's declining brother, George Shepard, and would have welcomed Margaret's expert ministrations. In such a critical moment, Clarinda would have reassigned Margaret to the senior Boltwoods in Amherst to get the family through the crisis, patching her own needs in Hartford with someone temporary. But Margaret was out of their control, uprooting and preparing herself to go west, and that was the problem. They wanted obedience and the least they expected was deference. Little did Margaret know that, as she took care of errands for their daughter-in-law, her happy countenance and enthusiasm about her move west only made things worse.

So pleased at the sight of "Mother and Father Boltwood" coming arm-in-arm along an Amherst street, Margaret went forward in greeting only to tumble back in shock. Lucius and Fanny stared grimly, said nothing, and turned away. This was uncharacteristic behavior from two people known for their courtliness and conversational charm. In fact Fanny had such a voluble reputation that college students late to class had only to say to the professor, "I met Mrs. Boltwood on the street" for the professor to "put up one hand in a gesture of understanding and exclaim, 'Say no more. You are excused.'"[28] But this was not the Fanny Margaret met. She gave the senior Boltwoods the benefit of the doubt, perhaps implicitly understanding how difficult it would be for them to parse out their feelings of loss over Fanny's brother from the departure of their maid. What else could Margaret do when the Boltwoods held all the power?

Meanwhile, letters from Hartford formed an unanswered pile. At first, Margaret was too upset to reply to Clarinda or say anything about her unusual encounter with the senior Boltwoods. She even held her tongue about the evening when she was back visiting with one of the maids in the senior Boltwoods' kitchen. Suddenly Lucius Boltwood walked through the kitchen and Margaret was, as always, happy to see "Father Boltwood." He, however, refused to acknowledge her. To make matters worse, her departure for California was

delayed and the longer she remained, the angrier the senior Boltwoods became whenever they encountered her. Things were getting mighty uncomfortable in such a small town for Margaret and her family. Adding to the insult, she took an assignment with Edward Dickinson. That was over the top. Possession is nine-tenths of the law. Sensing how much she was out of her depth to control the senior Boltwoods' rage and worried for her sister's family, Margaret finally blurted it out to their daughter-in-law on March 2, 1869, emphasizing three times their refusal to speak with her:

> no one spok[e]
> to me [.] [F]ather [Boltwood] went true the kitchen
> But he did not spak to me [;] it was
> when Mr. shepherd was sick and
> often sence I met Mother and father [Boltwood]
> in the street and the[y] did not spak[29]

Eventually Fanny and Lucius did speak—but it might have been wiser to have held their tongues. It was going to take yeoman efforts by Clarinda to reverse the damage:

> they said that I did not
> care for any of there family and that
> when I would go in to the house that
> I would be ordered out as any was[.] But
> I am sorry that I had to make so
> much trouble to any person[.] if it
> was the will of the lord not [to] inflect
> me with so many troubles as I had[,]
> I woul[d] be in hartford with you where
> I will always call my home.[30]

The senior Boltwoods saw defection when Charles Shephard lay dying, but any need of theirs would have superseded the maid's own. When Margaret tended to her father on his deathbed, in spring 1868, Clarinda inquired about when her maid would return to work and Margaret responded: "I cant tell you when to come home for i dont know When I can; as of corse, I must tend to my father death bed. you Will not Blame me."[31] Although the tacked-on apology, "you Will not Blame me," is common to Irish and Hiberno-English because of a reluctance to be too blunt, in Margaret's handling it also acts as an indirect reprimand; as if to say, you had better *not* blame me.[32]

Lucius and Fanny angrily claimed, six months after Margaret's family tragedies, that she no longer cared about their family. To Margaret that was patently

untrue. She believed she would still be working for the Boltwoods if her parents' deaths and brother-in-law's nearly fatal fall hadn't catapulted her life in a new direction. Still sorrowing from her losses, the hostility and loss of affection by her "fictive kin," Lucius and Fanny, was unbearable.[33] Moreover, threats from the Boltwoods were not to be taken lightly by Amherst's poor. Margaret was incensed by her powerlessness and as ready to leave Amherst as she'd ever been. "I will [soon] be from them all," she admitted with relief.[34] She revised her California departure for May 1 which meant that by April 1 she could escape the odd Dickinson Homestead—and Boltwood ill will.

Margaret's feelings were wound tight. Unlike her normally broad hand, her lines were pinched when she apologized to Clarinda for being out of touch, assuring her that she would always think of her (former) mistress, five years her senior, as a "friend and mother to me." Margaret explained that she put off writing Clarinda until her plans were firm. If nothing untoward happened, departure was imminent, she was pleased to report, and involved being met by her brother in Central America:

> But I waited all this time to
> tell you when I would go to california [.]
> [Know] that if nothing dont happen to
> me I will go the first of May [;] that
> is the time I have set to go [.] I will
> lave my plase the first of April
> to get ready [.] My oldest Brother will
> meet me in Panama [;] that is half way
> so that I think I wont feal lonsom[35]

After the introductory good tidings, Margaret broached the serious rupture that deeply troubled. Apparently Lucius Manlius had come up from Hartford to visit his parents with his young son George. Margaret claimed that if she'd known they'd been in Amherst—"lett my fear be what it will"—she would have gone to see them at the senior Boltwoods' home.[36] She missed the junior Boltwoods so much she would've risked Lucius and Fanny's wrath. Margaret wanted them to know how painful it was to not be able to express her condolences at George Shepard's funeral. She defended herself, knowing she hadn't done anything wrong and was undeserving of their censorship. Margaret's courage and sense of self-worth, which Emily Dickinson would so admire, never wavered when she wrote:

> I dont want to disapoint any person
> or Brake my word[;] if i be Poor

and working for my living I will
alway try to be rite[37]

It's an interesting turn of phrase: "I will alway try to be rite." The context suggests a slip of the tongue meaning she will always try to *do right*. In the midst of formidable pressure, Margaret's pride and sense of self emerge in this neat little phrase. Never obsequious, she fully intends to *be right*. She says she'll put up with the blame, even though she knows it was wrongly intended, in part, because she'll shortly be out of harm's way. The appeal to Clarinda was as much to stick up for herself as to make things right for Tom and Mary Kelley, who had ambitions of their own and would be dependent on the goodwill of the town's powerful families. It was imperative for all of them that Clarinda hear Margaret's side of the story (perhaps it was safe to do so while under the Dickinson roof). Clarinda was her mouthpiece because she could reason with anyone and get her way; Margaret had witnessed exactly that time and again. Clarinda was both formidable and skillful enough to take on the senior Boltwoods:

. . . I will Put up with
all that said to me when I know
that it is the [w]rong thing that is
said [.] I will [soon] be from them
all[.][38]

Fanny and Lucius Boltwood were Margaret's first "friends" when she arrived in Amherst and their treatment of her—the inability to separate out loyalty from what Margaret saw as a house-management frustration—was disappointing. After so many years of employment, they saw "ownership" in a relationship that was an at-will hire. Any false step, no matter how many years she'd been with them, and they would sack her on the spot. Margaret was so upset she couldn't even form complete sentences—just the staccato of pent emotion:

I had no friends here when
I needed friendship But youre father
and mother Mr shephard and
would be wicket if I would not
think of them I felt very Bad
that I could not go to see
Mr Boltwood at the funerel
But no one will ever turn
me out if can[39]

Margaret spared them her presence at the Shepard funeral back in December as much for their feelings as for her own. When she wrote hurriedly "no one will ever turn me out if can" she was saying with as veiled a threat as she could get away with that "no one will ever turn me out if I can help it." Margaret gauged rightly. Clarinda sized up the situation, saw that her in-laws were out of line, and moved into high gear. It had been a strategic error on their part should Margaret's plans change once again. If there was any way of making it so, Clarinda wanted Margaret back at the Boltwood washbasins in Hartford.

Whatever Clarinda employed to soothe Margaret and get her in-laws to toe the line, worked. The maid's next reply was full of love for her little boys, and Clarinda and Lucius Manlius themselves, with a special birthday note for George who turned eight at the beginning of March. A relieved Margaret added that there was so much she'd like to tell Clarinda Boltwood. Evidently, she'd missed out on another Amherst visit by Lucius Manlius and George. Of all people, those were the two she most wished to see. That was music to Clarinda's ears:

how Much I Would like to tell
you [.] remember me to Mr B [.]
if I know he was in town
I would go to see him and
gorge and [in a] Way I think I would
like to see them as well as any
one in Amherst [.] I will Write
to you oftener after this [.][40]

The familiar intimacy was back in her letter and Margaret's bond with the boys was as strong as ever. Clarinda had pulled off a fantastic feat, wooing their maid from afar. The boys helped. It was the children who were the biggest hook in retaining a maid's affection and labor. They were the special glue when lonely and isolated servants formed fictive kinships with their employers. Margaret's two dozen letters to the Boltwoods are full of "3 kisses for the little fellows" and "tell the boys not to go to sleep untill I see them."[41] Clarinda was shrewd enough to know they would be the lure should Margaret change her westward plans.

Sensing that Margaret hadn't formed emotional ties to the Dickinsons, there was still time to act. Clarinda and her husband must have joined forces to effect such a reversal of sentiment in the senior Boltwoods. Shortly, Fanny and Lucius sent a store of apples to Margaret's sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Tom Kelley. This peace offering from their own orchard was fairly trans-

parent and Margaret contritely acknowledged Fanny's munificence to the poor:

> youre mother B send
> thomas kelley a grate
> lot of Apples Which he
> [thanks] her very Much [.]
> She is so kind to think [of]
> the [Poor][42]

How to get servants, keep them, or cope with the tremendous work in a lapse between servants, dominated parlor talk in the Victorian era.[43] Clarinda Boltwood could have written the how-to book on maid retention. She was clear, a good manager, generous, and determined (or bordering on imperious, depending on who you were). She created a backup plan, the hiring of a Mrs. Orcutt, when she thought she might lose Margaret because of a much delayed move to Washington, D.C., in fall 1867. When maid and mistress were temporarily separated right before the Washington move, Clarinda felt she risked losing her maid because her mother-in-law Fanny didn't know how to properly "handle" Margaret. At the time, Margaret was distraught with the approach of the one-year anniversary of her mother's death. It made Amherst that much bleaker to no longer have a mother "to spake a word to."[44] That's how Margaret described her loss: by the speech that bound mother and daughter.

Clarinda wanted to do the best thing for her maid and she persevered. She made sure Fanny sent Margaret to her in Goshen—where there was little Margaret needed to do in the way of work—despite Fanny's expressed household needs. What Fanny considered treating a servant too well was her daughter-in-law's formula for retaining a maid's loyalty. Of course it was about more than building loyalty. Clarinda Boltwood was caring and generous. Maid and mistress looked after each other as two women, especially in those extended periods when Lucius Manlius was absent. The two women hovered over the family together, delighted in the boys' accomplishments, kept watch on old Aunt Hannah, and even slept in the same chamber.

Another comfort for Margaret, in the Boltwood household, was their acceptance of her Catholic faith. For anyone raised in 1850s Protestant America—where "Catholic fictions" were trumped by Protestant "truths"—it was almost impossible not to disdain Catholicism.[45] Its lack of millennial urgency, for one thing, made it highly suspect. But after the Civil War, people began to relax around Catholicism (which was rapidly becoming the single largest faith), and this was seen in the Boltwood home by Clarinda's tolerance of her maid's religious practices.[46] Perhaps also as a Baptist, not adherent to her own family's

Episcopalianism, she made allowances for her maid's faith—which were not minor. Hearing Mass was most of a two-day affair with parishioners walking down to Holyoke from Amherst on Saturday evening, about twenty miles distant, and walking back the next afternoon. Making note of it, Clarinda assured her absent husband that she can well manage in the interim while Margaret "is 'going trotting off to meeting.' With that intent she left home tonight not to return until tomorrow. We shall get on nicely."[47] When Lucius Manlius was house-hunting in Washington, D.C., in fall 1867, he did so with an eye toward proximity to a Catholic church. Happy that he had finally secured lodgings after several false starts, he wrote asking his wife to inform Margaret "that the house I have hired is nearer to the Catholic Church than the other house which I expected to have. I know that she will like Washington."[48] They may have done this as a lure to keep Margaret in their employ but the Boltwoods seemed genuinely solicitous. However, Clarinda found Catholic practice different enough to mention to her husband how Margaret had waited for her to return home so that she could pray outdoors: "She now goes to the side of the house and kneels down to say her prayers."[49]

Perhaps there wasn't that much for Clarinda to worry about after all. Mistress and maid were close. After months of separation from her husband, Clarinda formed a sisterly bond with Margaret. Weeks into the Homestead job, in March 1869, Margaret confided to her former mistress: "I like it very well [.] But it is not my home [;] my home is with you [.] I am as strange here as if I came here te work yester."[50] This is just what Clarinda wanted to hear. The conversation had shifted away from the bad behavior of her in-laws to the strangeness of their peers.

But the senior Boltwoods knew Emily Norcross and Edward Dickinson. They well understood what they were in for. As it would turn out, they were right. Being the tenacious Edward's daughter, Emily Dickinson knew how to apply herself to the task of wooing this maid. The Boltwoods were a minor obstacle, she surmised, compared to the rushing magic of the word "California." When Margaret stood at the stove turning out the midday roast, Emily Dickinson mixed a pudding. This is when the poet could gather intelligence and strategize. She could see what made Margaret tick and, in the answers to seemingly

benign questions, discern the maid's desires and dreams. An effective strategy was being hatched in spring 1869 unbeknownst to the lass from "South Tipp."

Emily was motivated. Three years before—writing full tilt, unhindered, poems pouring out of her daily—she lost her first, steady maid. Margaret O'Brien, another immigrant from Ireland, had worked dependably for nine or ten years in the Homestead until she married her way out of domestic service. With the O'Brien–Lawler wedding, on October 18, 1865, the poet was plunked back in the kitchen. Between intermittent help, Emily produced the meals her family "prized."[51] She was an inspired cook and baker but kitchen duties were considerable, onerous, and ate up precious writing time. She knew she needed a maid with just the right temperament who had staying power. Staying power turns out to have been exactly what Margaret had. Only after burying the last Dickinson, Lavinia, in 1899, did Margaret Maher leave their kitchen for her own. Emily trained her attention on that spring's tug-of-war and what she could do to end it in her favor.

Lucius and Fanny Boltwood were the Dickinson's social peers—and as formidable.[52] Fanny was a force to be reckoned with. Her white porticoed home, built in the lee of Amherst College, was a social hub for many great thinkers of the day. Besides Fanny's first cousin, the renowned writer and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Boltwoods hosted such luminaries as theologian Henry Ward Beecher, orator and abolitionist Wendell Phillips, poet Oliver Wendell Holmes, Senator Rufus Choate, and a long list of governors—men whose voices would have buzzed as well in the Dickinson parlor, another political, social, and intellectual locus for the town. Fanny loomed large with her family connections in Boston and Concord. Lucius was born into a farming family of moderate means whose farm duties competed with his ambition for an education; nine months' farming allowed only three months in the village school. He walked fifty miles to attend Williams College from which he graduated with high honors while teaching winters at the center school in Amherst.

Edward, on the other hand, was born to a leading town father, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, whose Homestead, commissioned in 1813, was a "gracious but explicit assertion of money and success."[53] Samuel wagered his entire family fortune in founding Amherst Academy to educate young people of the town and Amherst College to prepare young men for the ministry. The whole enterprise left him politically insolvent and financially bankrupt. Edward was anxious, after his father's fall from grace, to restore his family's place, the one he watched Samuel Fowler sacrifice to his passion. Passion might be too restrained a word. A "flaming zealot for education and religion" is how his own great-granddaughter, Martha, described him.[54]

Both Lucius and Edward received legal training under Samuel's tutelage. Lucius went into practice for a few years with Samuel but, wisely for Lucius, they

dissolved their joint practice before Samuel's financial fall. Instead of joining his father's practice, Edward spent many an hour trying to disentangle Samuel's precarious affairs. Looking for better models, Edward followed in the mold of Lucius Boltwood, his senior by ten years. He found much to esteem in Lucius in the winter of 1838 while both were on the Boston circuit.[55] Back in Amherst, like Lucius, Edward became a successful lawyer, insurance agent, speculator in real estate, and officer for Amherst College. The two families exchanged notes and social courtesies. They knew each other's business down to what occurred in the kitchen. Margaret Maher's reputation would have preceded her. It was a bold if discomforting move then to "steal" Fanny and Lucius's maid. Edward's subsequent bluster and threats to Margaret no doubt arose from his mixed feelings.

I Will Write to You Oftener

Letters with a Hartford postmark landed often enough on the central hall table of the "ancient mansion" (JL 52). Watching just how high the Dickinsons jumped, when Clarinda's familiar hand was emblazoned on the envelope, Margaret got a sense of her bargaining power. She told Clarinda:

> [they] get very excited
> when you write to me
> for fere that [I] Will go
> to you[56]

Clarinda's missives were filled with news of her boys' antics and dates when Lucius Manlius would be in Amherst with his eldest hoping to visit her. Visit they did, and even extracted a promise, sometime in mid-March, that by summer she would come back "home" to the Boltwoods. They'd done it again! On a simple visit, the librarian and his affable eight-year-old had pulled on her heartstrings and Margaret determined to leave this time for sure. The Dickinsons went on the offense. To earn Margaret's affections and loyalty, they heaped her with praise, raved about her butter, gloried in its weekly arrival on their table, and assigned her cat-petting duty; Margaret had admitted: "You know how I love cats."[57] Even if she was being ironic, the point was to brag about the lightness of her duties. Initially though, she found herself growing impatient with the hordes of cats, each with its own dish:

> we have so many cats
> to take care of that I would
> like to have some help [.]
> But for Intend to lave

very [soon,] I would be
very cross to them [.] But
I will keep my temper
for another While [;] I am
always very patient [.][58]

Clarinda was comforted by this somewhat annoyed report about the Dickinson household. The new wrinkle, though, was that Margaret wouldn't be leaving the Dickinsons' on the first of April. On March 24, she wrote:

Mrs Boltwood you
must think that I am
very fortunite in my plans [.]
Brother tommy wrote to
me last week and
told me me not come out
there for there is to mine
sickness there [.] he have
the [ague] very bad so
that he would not let me
go by no [means.] well
I must make the best
of it [.] tommy say that
he will come home to
me some time so I will
try to bare it with all
the rest of My trouble [.][59]

With "mine sickness" (or "ptomaine sickness") rampant in California, it was prudent to wait. Margaret's resignation about yet another delay was balanced by the delight of expecting her brother as soon as his recovery from fever and chills allowed for travel. For Clarinda, the news provided a window of opportunity *and* cause for worry. The defection the Boltwoods dreaded might come to pass. If so, it required some fancy footwork. The battle was on. Clarinda acted as soon as she put down Margaret's letter. She dispatched to Amherst the magic formula of Lucius Manlius and George to get Margaret to agree to come back for the summer.

The boy and his father may have even traveled twice from Hartford to see her, once to extract Margaret's promise and the second time to bolster it at the beginning of April 1869. She missed the second trip because she was twenty

miles away in Palmer (pronounced "Pah-mer" by locals) making good on her promise to the Boltwoods:

> I went to Pamer [,]
> the day that Mr. Boltwood
> was up here [,] to get the
> girl that worket for them
> before me [;] and she would
> come But [they] would not
> take her[60]

It would be better, Margaret reasoned, to present a solution in the form of the substitute when announcing to Edward Dickinson that she was leaving that summer for Boltwood employment. How little she knew the Dickinsons. No, Margaret didn't see it coming. Compliments showered upon her like rain. Wouldn't this have been the ideal time to have held off visitors with the explanation that a new maid had to be acclimated (thereby keeping the work load lighter)? Here was a moment when Edward and Emily Norcross's domestic ex-

pectations, that their two daughters carry their weight at home, bore additional fruit. While Margaret washed the pots, Emily had no children to distract her from drying them.[61] While Maher stood at the stove turning out a midday stew, Emily mixed cake batter—gathering intelligence and strategizing. She could discern how much the junior Boltwoods paid so that her father could offer to raise the maid's wages well above what Lucius Manlius, early in his career, was capable of affording:

> . . . Mr Dicksom
> Said he would Pay me as
> much more wages [sooner than]
> let me go[62]

Edward Dickinson further threatened to be angry with all of them, Boltwoods included, if Margaret were to leave just then. Still pricking from the senior Boltwood's angry displays, Margaret was alert to his threat. Her family couldn't afford the wrath of *two* powerful families. She cautioned Clarinda:

> it [was] last night that
> I settled with Mr: D [;]
> if I Would lave Now
> and go to you it would
> caus them to be very
> angry With us all [,] so we
> will Wait for another
> time[63]

While needing to "wait for another time" was frustrating for Clarinda, this is not what alarmed her. She still held out hope and she was used to getting her way. The wage issue was not insurmountable. Her father-in-law might help them with a contribution as he had done with their rent in Washington. Given how much damage Fanny and Lucius Boltwood had wreaked in the previous months, Clarinda might appeal for cash if that became necessary. She'd crafted a brilliant campaign from afar. There was no way a house of four rather independent and awkward adults could compete with the rambunctious, unbridled joy of three young boys. Unless, of course, Tom Kelley stopped by to conduct business with Squire Dickinson. Seeing Tom's unmistakable one-armed frame, the poet could have seized an opportunity to mention the black cake she'd just made and her hope that his Nell and Kate would tell her if it was any good. The clatter of her nine- and seven-year-old nieces arriving breathless at the Homestead's "piazza"

door would have cheered Margaret—whom Emily had taken the liberty of calling "Maggie."[64]

It wasn't any one thing, but a constellation. What the Dickinsons rightly gauged is that long-term personal bonds were central for Margaret; the same long-term bonds that the senior Boltwoods trampled the winter before. Nevertheless Clarinda Boltwood was able to repair those bonds expertly, if temporarily, with the help of her children. She evoked a sense of duty (and perhaps guilt). Clarinda was as expert a manipulator as Margaret. The two had staged so well, in concert, the repair of the senior Boltwoods' sentiments toward Margaret. But did Clarinda Boltwood see it coming, with the letter from Margaret's brother? Apparently Michael or Tom Maher sent a note to Edward Dickinson expressing hope that his sister would stay in her good position at the Homestead. Did Edward actually show Margaret the letter or just tell her of its contents? Whether her brother actually wrote to Edward or the whole thing was a ruse concocted by the Dickinsons, the paternalism irked Margaret. On April 6 she contritely told Clarinda Boltwood:

> [Edward Dickinson] had a letter
> from my Brother telling
> him he wished I would
> stay for the Preasant [,] But
> there one thing sure [,] I will
> do as I like [.][65]

The significance of Tommy or Michael Maher writing from the West regarding employment prospects was not lost on Margaret. Yet here was a spark of her independent spirit that would later prove so vital to Dickinson readers. When her brother's letter misfired—although not completely—Margaret's sister stepped in.

If Clarinda Boltwood had known what the Dickinsons and Kelleys were up to, she might have been alarmed by the way Margaret closed her April 6 letter. But Clarinda was cheered to read that Margaret planned to leave the Dickinsons exactly when she wanted and without giving much in the way of notice. That was the can-do and will-do spirit she had come to rely on in her maid. It's what made her so valuable an employee and why the Dickinsons were pulling out all the stops to keep her for their own. Clarinda had seen evidence numerous times. There was the time they packed up one house in forty-six bundles to move to another state. Margaret was with her every step of the way, selling off newspapers, readying boxes for the movers, purchasing supplies. Then there were the numerous weatherizing tasks Margaret undertook alone to prepare the Boltwood house for winter. Inclement weather didn't deter her from journeying

through the mountains to Goshen. Nothing held back Margaret's willingness to "be there without fale."[66]

Clarinda might have been worried that the only reason Margaret gave for disliking the Dickinson job was that she was "lonsom in Amherst."[67] Clarinda knew what being lonesome in Amherst meant for Margaret. Given how anxious she was to join her brothers, it reminded Clarinda of how her maid needed to act on a decision once it was made. This was something Clarinda was sensitive to when they had suffered so many delays in their move to Washington just a year and a half earlier. When Lucius Manlius's career took him to the Library of Congress, Margaret was nearly undone by the many false promises of departure as he lost out on one house and went in search of another. Margaret had needed something to occupy her hands and mind with the approaching one-year anniversary of her mother's death. In fact, she needed an escape route from Amherst, if not from the excruciating feelings around maternal absence.

However if Clarinda had coupled Margaret's lonesomeness with comments about the Dickinson workload, the hair on the back of her neck might have prickled:

> . . . all
> that is in the house
> is very fond of me and
> [does] every thing for my
> comfort [,] in fact [they] are
> [too] kind to [their] help[68]

Observing how Margaret loved cats yet was put off by the Homestead's sheer number of felines, the Dickinsons made her play with them. Doting on kittens would be welcome respite for a maid whose workday easily extended ten to twelve hours and more when there were visitors. Margaret wasn't about to let Clarinda miss the message about workload; it might work to her advantage:

> there is one grate
> trouble [:] that I have not
> half enough of Work so
> that I must play with
> the cats to [Please] Miss
> Vinny [.] You know how I love
> cats[69]

Between April 6 and Margaret's next letter on June 22, Clarinda Boltwood was busy. Or as busy as the Dickinsons. She again dispatched her husband to

Amherst to extract Margaret's promise to return to her family in September. Fortune again smiled on the Dickinsons. A Maher brother had helped Edward thwart Margaret's plan to work for the Boltwoods in the summer. This time, her sister was the agent. The Dickinsons had a formidable ally in Mary Kelley.

I Have But One Sister

When Mary found out that Margaret was planning to return to Hartford in September, all was not well. It was only a year since Tom's brush with death and the loss of their father. In less than two years Mary lost her parents to the grave and her brothers to California. She refused to part with her sister, even fifty miles downriver to Hartford. Where the paternalism of her brother's letter irked Margaret, her sister simply put her foot down and Margaret obeyed. Mary was fifteen years her senior and used the power. Tommy and Michael's stories of the gold country set Mary to thinking—but not in the ways that fired Margaret's imagination. Mary may have marched to the letter writer at the depot and outlined her own needs to her brothers and what she thought best for Margaret. Suppose Mary and Tom Kelley didn't know how to read and write. Forging a partnership with Margaret, who did, could have been critical to their success. If Tom Kelley was working for Edward Dickinson at this point (and reason would suggest he was working for the Squire in some capacity), what would Edward's displeasure mean if Margaret's will triumphed? A poor man with one arm had few options in the world and his dependants had less. Could there be implications for the large families of Tom Kelley's brothers, James and Michael, also struggling to get a sure footing? The reach of Edward Dickinson's anger was not to be contemplated. Whatever transpired behind closed doors at Kelley Square, Margaret changed her tack.

Cherries were plump and ready for picking in the Dickinson orchard when Margaret retracted her promise to Lucius Manlius and the family she loved so dearly—all because of her sister's overrule:

> I told Mr B
> that I would go to live
> with him the first of Septembr [.]
> I would But Sister would not
> be plased to it [at] all [.] She would
> not give me any consent to go
> from her [.] She have So much
> to do and to Bare that
> I dont know how to lave
> her as she have no other

comfort But me [.] I must do
all that I can for her [,] you
must not Blame me for I do
love you and all youre family
But you know I have But
one sister and I cant love
her [too] much[70]

But it wasn't just Mary. Margaret had changed. Service can do that; encourage a hewing to the straight and narrow.[71] Perhaps privately she hesitated about starting over in the West and was glad for the excuse of sisterly bonds. Also, after four months' of laboring at the Homestead, Margaret acknowledged that she could no longer "do [the Boltwoods'] Work that is as I used [to]."[72] It is a testament to how exhausting nineteenth-century housework was that this twenty-eight-year-old no longer felt able to manage the cooking and cleaning for a growing family of five. Boltwood babies continued to arrive and Lucius Manlius was building his career. The family had moved five times in the previous nine years. That doesn't include the packing up and moving chores associated with extended vacation stays in Goshen and Vermont that added tremendously to Margaret's workload.

The Dickinsons simply had more stability and economic resources at this stage of their lives. As attached as Margaret was to the Boltwoods, she and Mary were getting used to again being in each other's orbits. Margaret could walk down Main Street after dinner to the other side of the Dickinson Meadow. Kelley Square, a multigenerational compound of two and later three houses, was tucked below a brow at the edge of the Meadow and made private, from the depot, by the backing of a train car onto an auxiliary track. When the day's work waned and the evening was fine, they could sit beside the brick walk that wound between the houses and under fruit trees and trellises of grapes and roses.[73] The two sisters could have tea together and Margaret could tease her nephews or comb and plait her nieces' hair. There was the camaraderie and support of having her eldest niece working next door for Austin Dickinson's family. Margaret and her Kelley kin were creating their own pipe dreams and becoming fiscally entwined. On the first of July in 1874 Austin Dickinson witnessed one of those transactions when Tom Kelley promised to pay his sister-in-law the handsome sum of $400 plus annual interest "on demand for value received."[74] Eventually Margaret, her brother Tom Maher, and Mary and Tom Kelley would pool their resources and build a third house at the Square for boarding newer Irish immigrants. It was with some regret—for sentiment, feelings of love, and indebtedness to the family that had helped launch her in America—that Margaret broke the news to Clarinda at the end of Junė 1869:

Sorry to disapoint you and
Mr. Bolt Wood But it is
Better to have me do So
now then to go down and
not be able to Stand
the Work[.] You Will have
better change to get a good
girl and I hope you Will
get a good one[.] When you
go to goshen in August
I will go to See you
and the children and spen
a day with you....
you Will plase excuse me
in all my disapointments
to you for I don't do so
with out good reason
you [may] be sure

youre truly Margaret
Maher with love to
you all[75]

Because her feelings were mixed, Margaret asked the Boltwoods to please excuse her for disappointing them. In a last spirited self-defense, she claimed she didn't "do so with out good reason" but then tacked on "you [may] be sure." In typical Irish and Hiberno-English phrasing, Margaret's adding of this end-phrase was a way to carefully soften her delivery.[76] And so, somewhere between the sixth of April and the twenty-second of June, Margaret Maher shifted allegiances and became "Miss. Emily.[s] and Vinnia.[s] Maggie."[77]

The Norcross-Dickinson business acumen shone brightly throughout their "campaign." The family made at least four decisive moves and got lucky twice. Coupled with two Boltwood errors, the girl from the Golden Vale was theirs. Emily Dickinson was not going to let Margaret get away and her father was her mouthpiece and co-conspirator. If the Dickinsons were famous for operating as their own sovereigns, this surely was the rarer occurrence when they effectively joined forces.

Concord grapes weighted the vines and the Baldwin apples were crisping when Margaret Maher composed her next letter to Clarinda Boltwood. It was a newsy letter about her recent three-week vacation and a plan to visit Hartford the following spring on her birthday. She queried Clarinda about the Bolt-

woods' vacation and whether the boys caught any fish when they were in Vermont. She enclosed a likeness of herself. There's not a mention of employment, just a sharing between two who know and care for each other. Upstairs a poet was grouping her poems into sets; something she hadn't done for three or four years. Although she had a very competent maid in the kitchen now, or rather, *because* she did, Emily gravitated more and more to that morning-lit room. It is worth calling attention to this. After 1870, Emily began writing increasingly on the kinds of scraps that gather on kitchen counters: the backs of recipes, grocery lists, circulars, and food and medicine wrappers make it clear that she was composing in the pantry while her maid stirred the pot.[78] Margaret hummed a tune while her mistress sifted flour and that made the poet think of something which she quick-jotted on the back of an envelope. It could be revised later when she had more time. Content and productive is what Emily Dickinson was.

Fourteen months went by and on November 2, 1870, Margaret thanked Clarinda Boltwood for the offer to stay with them (that is, work for them) for the winter. In declining, she said she would like to avail herself but she couldn't leave her sister this winter. Mary was pregnant with her eighth baby; a boy, William, who would have blue eyes like his maternal aunt and win her heart. Margaret evoked an idea of her return to the Boltwoods—a warm image of her former mistress and the newest baby, Fanny—that turns on her labor:

> how glad I would [be] to do
> the Work in the kitchen
> and you and Baby in
> bed taken a nap[79]

It was an evocation rendered in sepia, an attempt to resign both women to what would never happen. Mary Kelley and Emily Dickinson both got their way. Margaret's allegiance was assured. She concluded one of her last letters to Clarinda Boltwood with news of her fiscal prowess:

> dear Mrs B [I] Want to tell you how
> I Stand [.] I Bought Some nice
> thing since[:] a [Shawl] 40 dollers [,]
> a Blouse Silk dresss 35 dollers [, and]
> furss 42 dollers [.] I Still hold
> 200, in ~~in~~ safe keeping[80]

As their correspondence stretched further apart, it became obvious to both women that Margaret would not go west. Her ability to buy silks and furs while still putting aside funds was not insignificant. That Margaret could do so on her

Dickinson salary was not lost on Clarinda. Margaret's pooling of resources with her sister's family was vital to her well-being and that of her sister's family. It meant that when Mary and Tom Kelley passed away, in 1910 and 1920 respectively, they were not only able to will $400 to each of their eight children but to also leave provisions, including a house at Kelley Square, to see out the rest of Margaret's days.[81]

The Boltwood and Maher correspondence makes clear the anxiety created by the demands of nineteenth-century household work, from seasonally preparing house and larder for winter months to the dire straits created when sickness struck the mistress's family or the maid left to care for ill members of her own kin. What may have helped the Dickinsons' wooing of Margaret Maher is how differently the families were able to respond to these circumstances because of the resources at their command. Further, Emily and her sister Lavinia praised their maid where Clarinda criticized. That was the second Boltwood "error." It was the one major misstep in Clarinda's otherwise flawless campaign in the Dickinson-Boltwood wars. Although their inordinate praise may have been strategic in that critical spring of 1869, Emily never tired of praising or taking delight in her maid; it continued unabated for the rest of Emily's life. Clarinda, however, never stopped dispensing advice. She continued pointing out Margaret's shortcomings and areas for improvement. While Margaret put up with it, as a younger sister might, and maybe even found it useful at times, it was quite different from Emily and Lavinia's treatment of their maid. Margaret couldn't have helped turning toward them.

Clarinda actually seemed at her "maternalistic" worst when Margaret threatened to slip away from her: in October 1868, March 1869, and November 1870. It was as if Clarinda was getting in a parting shot: both showing Margaret she still needed Clarinda to watch over her and to convince herself that the maid had shortcomings after all. If maids turned to their employers as fictive kin, then mistresses appear to have done the same. Clarinda treated her maid as a mixture of employee and older daughter in need of moral instruction and governance.[82] Those are two areas that have always concerned employers about their live-in domestic servants. That impulse to instruct and criticize emerged most strongly just as Clarinda lost, or feared she was losing, her ability to control Margaret. Although Clarinda's letters to her maid have not been recovered, Margaret's responses make it amply clear that Clarinda continued to dispense advice even after Margaret was well-established in the Dickinson household. In closing her last known letter to her former mistress, in the spring of 1871, Margaret thanks her for the critical advice:

> dear Mrs, Boltwood I [thank]
> you ever So Much for

the good advice you
gave me I will try
Bare it in Mind
So as to never let
My Bad habets be
Master of Me again[83]

For Emily Dickinson to have called her "warm and wild and mighty" (JL 827) or for the poet's niece to suggest that Margaret had supremacy in her aunts' kitchen are indications that she came to comfortably rule the Homestead's "downstairs" roost. She'd come a long way from her initial discomfort. The transition she made from lonely newcomer to the heart of the hearth was not a smooth one, even with Dickinsonian praise. It's quite possible that praise from the two Dickinson sisters was meant to counteract their more exacting and oppressive parents. An impression passed down through the Maher-Kelley family was that "Austin and the father and mother were a different story. [Emily and Lavinia] valued the service they got from their servants. But not Austin."[84] For that impression to be preserved through generations speaks volumes. With time Margaret came to refer to the Homestead as a "dear old home."[85]

The Luck of Roaring Camp

Margaret Maher's attention was trained on the Golden West when it wasn't on Homestead parlor soot or helping her sister's children. Or perhaps it was in those moments alone, of blacking the Squire's boots, that she conjured what California might be like from a combination of her brothers' tales, newspaper accounts, and what she needed it to be. California was an irresistible intoxicant and the world rushed to it. The Maher brothers, Thomas and Michael, were probably together in San Joaquin County, a torrid dry California valley that rises in foothills toward the Sierra Nevada.[86] Thomas was twenty-three when he became a U.S. citizen there on September 5, 1871. The brothers may have been panning for the considerable placer gold that still runs off in the Mokelumne River. They were doing well enough so that their thirty-year-old sister was getting restless. That her brother-in-law, even with only one arm, was solidly in the workforce made it possible for Margaret to imagine a different narrative for herself.

It almost worked. Far less is known about the period leading up to spring 1873 when Margaret was again making plans to head west. Whatever missives she sent to her brothers in California's San Joaquin Valley or Las Animas Mine District in the territory of New Mexico haven't survived among family papers. If Margaret documented the ploys the poet used to keep her, those letters are

probably dust in the slackboard ghost towns troubling every wash and rib rise across the Southwest.

Surely Margaret felt a "warm front" as she and her mistress dallied over lattice pie crusts. California was a formidable foe—more than the Boltwoods had been. The West made folks feverish. Farmers from Maine to Georgia and west to Ohio put down their plows and slave whips; new immigrants took their chances on the promise of untold wealth. The West was full of prickly pears and outlaws (if there was any law at all in the home of Joaquin Murrietta and his notorious colleagues). Encroached upon and murdered, Indians retaliated by plundering the adobe and clapboard hamlets as the ink was drying on plans for reservations. Margaret's life there would not have resembled one focused on maintaining a staid Victorian family in the "shire" of Amherst.

By now it's certain how indispensable she had become to the denizens of the two greenly shaded houses buttressing Main Street; Edward Dickinson's yellow-brick Federalist home and his son Austin's dark Italianate villa next door. Margaret, the skilled nurse for both families, was summoned to remove a nail embedded in the poet's foot and once "fought" with her mistress over giving a gift to a Dickinson family friend.[87] Austin, after "a happy egg and toast provided by Maggie" (JL 394), cheerfully promised to make her his sole heir. (He did not.) And so it was with enormous relief that Emily reported in April 1873 to her cousins Loo and Fanny Norcross—making allusions to Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp"—that "Maggie preferred her home to 'Miggles' and 'Oakhurst' so with a few spring touches, nature remains unchanged" (JL 338). What stopped her, at thirty-two, from leaving isn't known. How large a role Emily played cannot be assessed but that she did so is assured. To give up on the promise of something better, even in the hardscrabble mining towns, was significant—unless she believed her situation was only temporary.

If Margaret tried again to head west it may not have crystallized into so clear a plan as the 1873 one; certainly not one that alarmed Emily enough to mention in (her extant) writing. There is not a word of her brothers—or their sister's intention to join them—until September 1880 when Michael was killed in a mine accident and "Maggie want[ed] to die" (JL 670). Chances are that he was mining in New Mexico: gold had been discovered in Las Animas in 1877 and the towns of Hillsboro and later Kingston sprung up to meet demand. Thomas Maher was in the thick of it when the area boomed and silver was discovered in the early 1880s. He worked other people's mining claims and became a cattle rancher when Hillsboro was known as a frontier cow town. When Michael didn't come back to Massachusetts, his Colt Frontier six-shooter did. Jammed in a leather holster tooled in El Paso, Tommy Maher gave it to the nephew who turned his Maher uncles down when they asked him to come west.[88] Nephew Tom W. Kelley preferred the predictability of plumbing Amherst pipes.

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