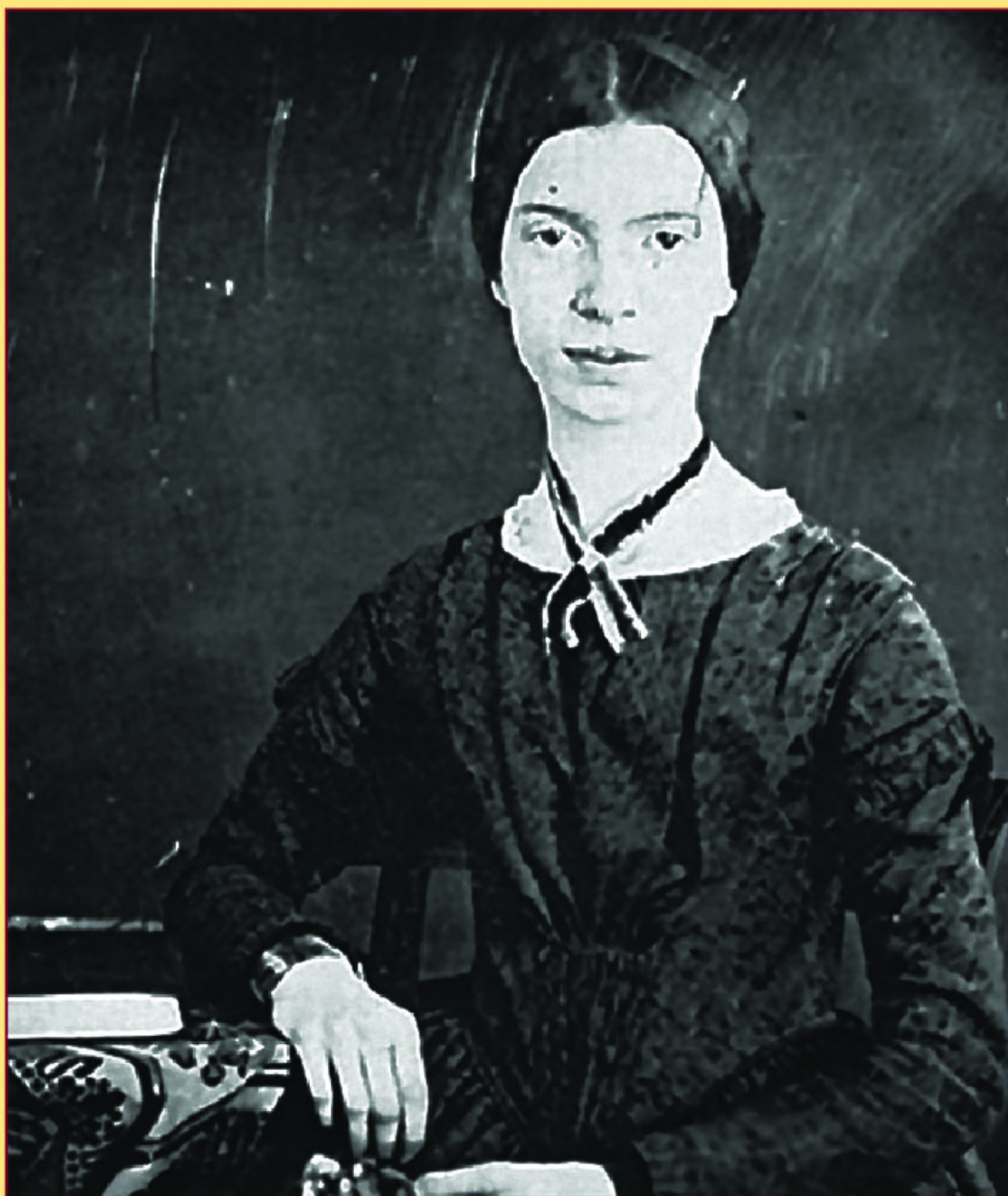
SHAMBHALA POCKET CLASSICS

THE POCKET EMILY DICKINSON



Copyrighted material

THE POCKET EMILY DICKINSON

Edited by

BRENDA HILLMAN

SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
2009

Copyrighted material

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Editor's Preface, A Note on the Poems, and
selection of poems © 1995 by Brenda Hillman

Reprinted by permission of
the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College
from THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, Thomas H.
Johnson, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press
of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951,
1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and
Fellows of Harvard College.

From THE COMPLETE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON
edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Copyright © 1929, 1935
by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; copyright © renewed
1957, 1963 by Mary L. Hampson. By permission,
Little, Brown and Company.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be
reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or
mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any
information storage and retrieval system, without
permission in writing from the publisher.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

♾ Printed in China on acid-free paper
Distributed in the United States by Random House, Inc.,
and in Canada by Random House of Canada Ltd

Cover art: daguerrotype of Emily Dickinson reproduced
by permission of the Trustees of Amherst College.

See page 161 for Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication data.

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

Editor's Preface
vii

Poems
1

Afterword
151

Index of First Lines
155

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The first edition of Emily Dickinson's poems I owned was a very skinny paperback with tea stains at the edges of the pages. It had the mythic quality of all of our first inherited paperbacks; we don't know where they come from, but they are old friends by the time they find us. This Emily had some sort of mongrel flower pattern on the cover—at once roses and poppies, but they were dark flowers—and within, fewer than one hundred poems with the pre-1955 bowdlerized punctuation, all the "correct" periods and commas. I realize now, of course, that it was the wrong way to start with Dickinson, but I used to take the little book down into the arroyo—the dry ditch behind the family house—and sit in the eroding dirt, where

Copyrighted material

the dog sniffed around while I read. One poem I read a lot begins: "I started Early—Took my dog— / And visited the Sea / The Mermaids in the Basement / Came out to look at me—." It was the sixties, and was about the time in a life when the issues of identity, the female body, and metaphysics were starting to produce the central questions. This poem is in part about one who travels between nurturing and fear, about how sexual terror and joy may be greeted in outside landscapes as well as in psychological ones, and in part about the activity of the soul in relation to its possible annihilation. It spoke deeply to me, over and over and over.

Because of the importance of this first little paperback to me, the idea of assembling, decades later, a compact, intimate volume of her poems was quite appealing. Emily Dickinson takes up every question

Copyrighted material

about existence we confront. She and Walt Whitman are the spiritual mother and father of American poetry. A look at the subject index to Dickinson's *Complete Poems* edited by Thomas H. Johnson shows that the two largest subject categories are the "Soul" and "Death." This helps explain why contemporary readers still find something rare and strange in her work, and why her poems address everyone: an elderly person struggling with questions of mortality; an adolescent confronting the search for who she is and why she is here; the contemporary artist who may find courage in her formal daring; the traveler—even one who travels for a living—who may find her work the perfect companion because it is so compressed. So the book you hold in your hand could be seen as a guidebook, for exploring the range of human experience.

Of the many reasons to read, or to

Copyrighted material

reread, Emily Dickinson, three seem important to mention to the general reader. First, read her for that peculiar, strange beauty only she is capable of. It is beauty that doesn't always ask for pure analysis. Opening this book anywhere, you can see that the power of her style comes from compressed excitement. She writes the largest things in the shortest space possible. In dazzling swiftness, we can see her great spirit intercept a question and take it to the interior spaces we didn't know we had. There the poem stays, like a tremendous piece of news dropped down a trap door. The metaphors are always in service of her mind at play, because even when she is deadly serious, she is somehow playful.

Much of the musical beauty in her poems, I find, has to do with breath, with breathlessness. Her poetic rhythms—the use of iambic tetrameter—derive from Protestant hymnals, and are greatly inter-

Copyrighted material

rupted during the most startling poems by the use of dashes and commas; in the original manuscripts, these appear as hooks, slashes, calligraphic strokes of the pen. Leaving aside the controversial question of whether the quatrains are always quatrains or something else (I will address this in a brief afterword), we can see that the potential solidness or tidiness of the stanzas and the iambic rhythms is made unsafe, precarious, risky by her quirkish punctuation—as if a rope bridge were strung across a raging river far below. The intellectual and physical excitement this creates in the reader is beautiful. A good example occurs in the poem that begins "There's a certain Slant of light":

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

Copyrighted material

This is one of my favorite stanzas. In this poem, winter light, with its oblique Slant, serves as a metaphor for—or rather, it corresponds to—the eternal wound inficted both outside of and inside a conscious being. The wound and the meaning are in the same place, for Dickinson. I find this stanza amazing partly because of the rhyme of "scar" and "are," and partly because a single comma isolates the "are" at the end of the last line. You must inevitably gulp a bit before reading that word, and slightly gasp afterward. . . . The breath, then, replicates both motion and isolation.

Besides beauty of form, there is the courage of her investigations of human experience. If the contemporary reader notes that she writes with the greatest ease about difficult subjects, it is important to remember that her project has to do with the truth of what people suffer. In a way, she is our first molecular biologist of pain,

Copyrighted material

so that during her period of vast productivity, there are many poems that take one degree (to use one of her favorite words) of the experience of suffering at a time. And since suffering for Dickinson so often has to do with loss, she examines with the most careful lens the relationship between the visible and the invisible realms. First lines like "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so –" "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –" "Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*" "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –" and "Pain – has an Element of Blank –" signal these investigations, and one thing we notice right away, if we can give up our prejudice against their "negative subjects," is that these poems are phenomenally stimulating—not in the way a violent movie stimulates, but in the way that seeing our own eyes in the eyes of another is exhilarating and shocking.

Copyrighted material

And third, although they are occasionally difficult to read, Dickinson's poems help us to live more purely and with more power. Because of their epigrammatic lines, they are infinitely portable. Fragments of these poems can stay in the brain for a long time, at once familiar and increasingly new. They carry us from comfortable to impossible realms within single lines of their strange diction, and we always want to figure out how the metaphors work, so we can repeat them over and over like mantras. Occasionally when students tell me it's hard to know how to read the poems, I tell them, read them quickly and let them shock you. If a line stays, read it again until you feel it is yours, and let the strange capital letters and the dashes carry the poems to the place in your unconscious that won't worry what they mean.

From 1862 to 1863, between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-two, Dickinson

Copyrighted material

drafted over five hundred poems—in one year. Some say Emily Dickinson had fallen in love with a minister who left town, others claim it was with a man who didn't leave town, and still others that she had had a disappointment with a female friend. Most agree—because of their subjects—that the poems were written in a state of extraordinary psychological stress. She had, a year or so earlier, become more and more reclusive. Reading the poems of this period is like watching someone take a long breath and begin to write with her own blood. While the temptation is to seek precise biographical sources for this outpouring, the appropriate response is awe.

The year 1862 is when the monumental losses from the Civil War reached horrendous numbers. Though the battles of Shiloh and Antietam probably did not affect Dickinson's daily life as much as did the

Copyrighted material

deaths from fevers among her neighbors in Amherst, the juxtaposition of these massive casualties from our family war with the breathtakingly intimate work she produced—poems that are at once compact and explosive, grand and interior, in which she explores all the aspects of loss and suffering and remakes her literary persona into a "Queen of Calvary"—is one of our most heartbreaking and compelling American literary paradoxes.

After 1860, Emily Dickinson chose to leave her house only a few times until her death in 1886. What many of us sometimes forget is that she chose one of the few positions of freedom available to her; in fact, given the options for women writers in her day (and the results she achieved), she probably made the only choice available to her. And it's important for us to recall that, even though her choice seems eccentric to contemporary

Copyrighted material

readers, she was also the middle, responsible daughter of a very busy household, very much a caretaker for family and servants. We have, besides her voluminous poems and letters, inherited some of her recipes, notably one for gingerbread; it makes a very large quantity.

Other facts of her life are relatively simple. Born in Amherst in 1830, the middle child of a prominent lawyer, she went away to Mount Holyoke Seminary for one year only. Her older brother's marriage to her close (and temperamental) friend Susan Gilbert occurred in 1856, and shortly thereafter Dickinson began to write poems that she would later assemble into packets or fascicles, little manuscript books tacked together with thread, which is how her sister Lavinia found them after her death. The crisis she experienced in the early 1860s remains a mystery, though much has been conjectured about the one to

Copyrighted material

whom her love poems are addressed and the intended recipient of the famous "Master" letters, drafts of which were also found in her desk. We do know that when she finally sent some of her poems "to the world" outside her family and friends, it was to a Boston man of letters named Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and that she asked him whether her verses "breathed." It was probably immediately apparent to her that Higginson wouldn't be a helpful critic, but she wrote to him anyway, often astonishing and entertaining letters. Otherwise, she requested advice from only a few friends. With the exception of a few dozen poems, Dickinson was the only reader of the more than seventeen hundred poems she produced. She died of Bright's disease, a debilitating kidney disorder. The inscription on her tombstone is a quote from her last "letter to the world"; it reads simply: "Called Home."

Copyrighted material

A few words about my selection process in this little volume: I chose the poems I've loved the best, and a few I learned to love in rereading Dickinson's complete work. I've tried to represent the range of her vision. I am indebted to Robert Hass, Stephen Mitchell, and Peter Turner for their suggestions and advice.

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

THE POCKET
EMILY DICKINSON

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!
Your prayers, oh Passer by!
From such a common ball as this
Might date a Victory!
From marshallings as simple
The flags of nations swang.
Steady – my soul: What issues
Upon thine arrow hang!

c. 1858

Copyrighted material

I NEVER lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels – twice descending
Reimbursed my store –
Burglar! Banker – Father!
I am poor once more!

c. 1858

Copyrighted material

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated – dying –
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

Low at my problem bending,
Another problem comes –
Larger than mine – Serener –
Involving statelier sums.

I check my busy pencil,
My figures file away.
Wherefore, my baffled fingers
Thy perplexity?

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

Our lives are Swiss –
So still – so Cool –
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their Curtains
And we look farther on!

Italy stands the other side!
While like a guard between –
The solemn Alps –
The siren Alps
Forever intervene!

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

ONE dignity delays for all –
One mitred Afternoon –
None can avoid this purple –
None evade this Crown!

Coach, it insures, and footmen –
Chamber, and state, and throng –
Bells, also, in the village
As we ride grand along!

What dignified Attendants!
What service when we pause!
How loyally at parting
Their hundred hats they raise!

How pomp surpassing ermine
When simple You, and I,
Present our meek escutcheon
And claim the rank to die!

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

WILL there really be a "Morning"?
Is there such a thing as "Day"?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they?

Has it feet like Water lilies?
Has it feathers like a Bird?
Is it brought from famous countries
Of which I have never heard?

Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
Oh some Wise Man from the skies!
Please to tell a little Pilgrim
Where the place called "Morning" lies!

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

THESE are the days when Birds come
back –
A very few – a Bird or two –
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old – old sophistries of June –
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee –
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear –
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze –
Permit a child to join.

Copyrighted material

Thy sacred emblems to partake –
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

To fight aloud, is very brave –
But *gallanter,* I know
Who charge within the bosom
The Cavalry of Woe –

Who win, and nations do not see –
Who fall – and none observe –
Whose dying eyes, no Country
Regards with patriot love –

We trust, in plumed procession
For such, the Angels go –
Rank after Rank, with even feet –
And Uniforms of Snow.

c. 1859

Copyrighted material

How many times these low feet
staggered –
Only the soldered mouth can tell –
Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
Try – can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead – hot so often –
Lift – if you care – the listless hair –
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble – more – shall wear –

Buzz the dull flies – on the chamber
window –
Brave – shines the sun through the
freckled pane –
Fearless – the cobweb swings from
the ceiling –
Indolent Housewife – in Daisies – lain!

c. 1860

Copyrighted material

I SHALL know why – when Time is
over –
And I have ceased to wonder why –
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky –

He will tell me what "Peter" promised –
And I – for wonder at his woe –
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now – that scalds me now!

c. 1860

Copyrighted material

I'm "wife" – I've finished that –
That other state –
I'm Czar – I'm "Woman" now –
It's safer so –

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse –
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven – now –

This being comfort – then
That other kind – was pain –
But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there!

c. 1860

Copyrighted material

I TASTE a liquor never brewed –
From Tankards scooped in Pearl –
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air – am I –
And Debauchee of Dew –
Reeling – thro endless summer days –
From inns of Molten Blue –

When "Landlords" turn the drunken
Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door –
When Butterflies – renounce their
"drams" –
I shall but drink the more!

Copyrighted material

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats –
And Saints – to windows run –
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the – Sun –

c. 1860

Copyrighted material

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by Noon –
Lie the meek members of the
  Resurrection –
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent –
  above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges –
  surrender –
Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow –

version of 1861

Copyrighted material

SHE sweeps with many-colored Brooms –
And leaves the Shreds behind –
Oh Housewife in the Evening West –
Come back, and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling in –
You dropped an Amber thread –
And now you've littered all the East
With Duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,
And still the Aprons fly,
Till Brooms fade softly into stars –
And then I come away –

c. 1861

Copyrighted material

Should you but fail at – Sea –
In sight of me –
Or doomed lie –
Next Sun – to die –
Or rap – at Paradise – unheard
I'd *harass God*
Until he let you in!

1861

Copyrighted material

The Lamp burns sure – within –
Tho' Serfs – supply the Oil –
It matters not the busy Wick –
At her phosphoric toil!

The Slave – forgets – to fill –
The Lamp – burns golden – on –
Unconscious that the oil is out –
As that the Slave – is gone.

c. 1861

Copyrighted material

I LIKE a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true –
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe –

The Eyes glaze once – and that is Death –
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung.

c. 1861

Copyrighted material

It is easy to work when the soul is at
play –
But when the soul is in pain –
The hearing him put his playthings up
Makes work difficult – then –

It is simple, to ache in the Bone, or the
Rind –
But Gimlets – among the nerve –
Mangle daintier – terribler –
Like a Panther in the Glove –

c. 1861

Copyrighted material