

Letters from a Young Poet

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ABSTRACT

Letters from a Young Poet

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This thesis documents one poet's coming to writing through the influence of Emily Dickinson. It is divided into three sections: the first is a correspondence between the poet and her muse—the character of Emily Dickinson; the second is a series of letters written by the female inmates of an asylum; the third is a series of poems that deal with Dickinson's ideas of circumference.

The invocation involves the poet and the Emily-muse in a journey through New Brunswick's Bay du Vin, during which they witness a terrible storm that kills many of the town's fishermen. The storm introduces death into the world of art, the world created by the poet and her muse as a kind of placeless heaven.

The second section is a series of letters written from the perspective of the fishermen's wives, now confined in an asylum. Titled "Much Madness is Divinest Sense / Letters from the Asylum," this section makes of its setting a significant symbol: a cage, a prison, the asylum figures finitude and limitation. In this milieu, distance, absence, death, pain and, indeed, madness become their opposites.

The final section, "Circumference," deals with the Dickinsonian idea of limitation and expansion, the I and the not-I and how one negotiates the distance between self and other, self and God. The final poems of this section investigate the world of Bay du Vin as seen through the poet's eyes. There is a movement away from Emily and towards the poet's plotting of her own circumference.

To my family for their love and support and thanks to my readers, Mikail, Mike,
Michelle and Kate.

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The Letters

Dear Emily,

Seek me out of the woods,
find me sitting by a found pool,
the orange moon a flame
in the dark black sky.

The Poet

Dear Poet,

Red stars
Fall from blue
We are arrows in the sky.

We are warriors of the stars.
Perfect passion is in His eye.

Of infinite love
is the silence of the night.

Of infinite spirit
is the blackness riddled right.

Emily

Dear Poet

Light knows what it wants
at its opaline edge it meets up
with infinity and returns.
Circumference in between.

I will show you many things
but in the end you will only see
what it is that you see.

Emily

Dear Emily,

One small bird unto the sky,
the colour red in your flight.
A humming bird—a revolving wheel,
casting an image by the light.

The Poet

Dear Emily,

I can see Him outstretched
against the sky
a paper body in white
against the blue backdrop
of night.

The golden moon lies
a thin distance,
an absence growing wings.

Will you let me
see quickly in between
the shades of the tree.

May I call out
that I am alive,
alive and conscious
of your gift of crumb.

The Poet

Dear Poet,

I am the unworn world captured in your web of light,
set me a sail in the rhythms of speech
dress me in purple and arguments that cannot be proven.

Emily

Dear Poet,

Do not look for me
under the blue ceiling.
It is distance
*a perfect paralyzing bliss*¹
the absence of a thing
is exactly what we miss.

Emily

¹ Emily Dickinson's Poems excerpted from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

Dear Poet,

A fisherman is in the mouth of the ocean
the waters rise off the coast of Bay du Vin.

This August afternoon is broken by the horizon
broken by the sound of his cries.

Say a prayer with azure alms
to try and keep him from the dying sky.

Emily

Dear Captain Richards,

This year is but a blank,
too cold to have done anything else
witness the high winds blowing the trees out at night.

A coast guard calls out, a fog horn
and a light like the eye of a cyclops
scouring the water for the bodies.

I look for any fisherman who is left behind
clinging to a lifesaver, a piece of wood,
something to name in the water
something to call out to.

The Poet

Dear Poet,

The power is off
transformers blown
they're out past the eye
and into the mouth of the ocean.

Captain Richards

Dear Poet,

The men are out past
the shore ravished
by the hands of the sea.

Emily

Dear Emily,

They are gone from the shores
from the coasts of Bay du Vin
from the fields and the farmers
from the fish and fisherman.

The Poet

Dear Poet,

How the waters closed around him
that we shall never know
how he stretched his anguish to us
that is covered too.

One stray ship passing
sees a face and then it's gone.
Under the waters seal
with eyes of death and on.

Emily

Dear Poet,

If you listen to me
I can take your hand
and guide you through
the darkness that you see.

Emily

Dear Emily,

I can see by the slanted light.
We move down a long road
beyond whose bend I do not see.

The Poet

Dear Poet,

Before us stands a building fixed
its windows mirrors behind which
the grief stricken women of this town reside.

Women left alone by death,
absence is their only heft.

Emily

Dear Emily,

I had no idea

I was travelling

I had no idea

I had been wandering.

The Poet

Madness is divinest Sense
Letters from the Asylum

I press my face against the Aprilled rainy glass,
knives at my throat, knives cutting into the bone
beyond which is a silence, a distance of the mind.

My eyes are telescopes and I can see further,
past the walls and into the woods,

where the doe slips into the underbrush
just after the hunter pursues with hounds.

Charlene Right

This is not the method of things at night in the spring when the lingering snow
still frozen to the hooves of your dreams, trespasses locations.

No this is not the method of churches leaning lamblike towards the sun. The hot white
pain. Incisions in the dark.

Wilma Godfry

This is the hour I like best.
The ghosts are fresh.

I can see them down the hall
translucent texts pieces of the fall.

Mona Wilson

I am entering the darkness
or else becoming small and beautiful
like a Japanese lantern.

Sandy Willows

I call beside myself
desert as far as far.

I am the world
that is too many wooden soldiers.

I hide down the hall
in the molecules
in the feathers
of this black crow.

A single bird singing
in the eye of a loaded gun.

Jessica Snow

I am growing old
I remember watching
my eyes grow eyes
as the snow the years falls
to my forehead.

No not this troublous
numbing of hands
in this dark room without a moon.

In my mind's eye
I see a glimpse of her golden light.
Presence gone—
Eternal night.

Daisy Sparks

My mind is going numb
a crack across my soul—
a sound beyond the blank.

Outside the ice is frozen
across the yard, little mirrors
of reflection, the zone of the sky.
The violet light of the sun.
How far is it to Hell? You ask,
I don't know in miles.

And then the windows shut
memory its frame,
my mother in the kitchen
a buzz fly at the pane.

Theresa Black

Below the retina
a buzzing in the brain
a constriction of the mind
the white hot iron of pain.

A prisoner of this world
broken bound and chained,
but these bracelets on my wrists
have made me Sovereign.

Sarah Bitting

Watching the paint peel
and then another coat,
this time a red one
from your mother's hall closet.

I ask you why I must stay
and you answer in a storm
the outlines of your speech
brushstrokes in red and blue.

Call back the stone
the asylum wall
it will surely make a line
or a circle
in the shadow of the eye,
it will surely mark the mouth
in sorrow.

Madonna Adams

Every detail is a sword
a cutting at my soul—
Renunciation is a balm
an absence of the mind.

Catherine Seeds

He has given me a crumb
when others have gotten loaves
And starve I will for I refuse
such a thing as this.

Mary David

My arms and legs diminish,
my life is a flash and yearn.

I reach out trying to feel for something
dropped down the grate of this world.

Martha Bowes

The salmon is taut with a wire
that calls back its life in the streams.

The cool plums and glass refracting
in the space between you and me,

absence is the distance
measured by substantiality.

Rachel Stark

It is the retina, the circles through which
we are caught in a place of dream,
caught in a stone, thrown over a bridge.

My living room is filled with canvases
straw men hanging in valleys
turned by the colour of splotch,
midfield in the light
the horizontal lines
a reflection, an origin.

When I look at the water
I can see him he goes on
repeating the voyage
like his pulse he goes on beating.
In the distance he goes on beating.

Mary Jane Mallory

Circumference

Sundays

That certain slant of light,
that leaden song,
walkers trudging in the streets.

The hills step off into blackening
primordial ice still gathered
ten inches thick—
a grey monument laid to the land.

The river flows down the middle
of the province
joining and dividing,
cracking and breaking.

On the Eastern bank the Catholics,
the West the Protestants.
Each their own view of water.

My mother was from the East.
On Sunday mornings she would call
all the morning she calls
like the ringing of dolorous bells.

Then waiting for the silence,
like fallen leaves turning in the wind.

We get ready,
my wool sweater too tight under my jacket
a hair shirt for a martyr.

*I don't like Paradise—
Because it is Sunday all the time.²*

Under God's eye and under yours
catching every little thing.

Small petal hands curled around quill
writing always poems.

² Emily Dickinson's Poems excerpted from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

Through the straight pass of suffering—
and you not even a Catholic,
waving from the other bank.

There are many small churches in town
with praying statues of Madonna
their ochre bricks drenched in snow.
Their interiors smell like confessionals.

The stained glass crucifixion,
a saint kneeling on a hill framed in crimson,
a reflection of faith: the roads wind
like a blue ribbon bowed in the center
right below the cross.

Ashes to Ashes dust to dust.
*You wrote Dust is the only secret.*³

³ Emily Dickinson's Poems excerpted from *The complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

Bay du Vin

The raspberry bushes face out to the bay.
The bay refracting in the sun—
the colour of wine.

We went down to the rocks
Beyond the dip of bell⁴

We stay in the house of make believe,
dishes cracked and half buried across the beach.
Chum buckets and driftwood relics.

Oysters are ripped and shucked across
the picnic table, the crab legs hung,
clams in the pail alive and violated,
gleaning you look into
the warm water of the undone.

Holding our breath
the cool stirs of air forced
their way into the shade through
the darkest corners of the cove.

Into the gaps of the universe
marked out with sharpened birch sticks,
staked out all along the curve of the bay.

⁴ Emily Dickinson's Poems excerpted from *The complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.

Into the dark

I know only the bottom,
on a midnight afternoon,
the snow flakes augural.

The sun falls into oblivion,
the waters thrust halts,
and the crow caws without reflection.

I step bare foot onto the ice,
my frozen feet where the river once was,
a naked proposition.

Beyond this the truth is invisible,
like the flakes falling to the ground,
white and then nothing.

Windows

Outside iced trees glistening white
across the yard.

I break in pieces like a jigsaw puzzle
poison in a jar.

The Angel's Side

There are no walls only large panes through which the sun shines
in the mornings and leaves me alone at night with the angel
whose powerful white wings press against the glass
like feathers under a microscope.

This is what the dream specifies:
The angel's pierced side fills the box with blood,
I lift her out and carry her across an open field on a stretcher
in my mother's boots, but when I return the panes are smashed,
the blood is gone and the sun is no longer.

A Way Out

I can not sleep within these walls
under the thin thatch roof of this cottage,
under the black line of this sky.
I see the distance
and the shadow of a wing in flight.

A Recollection

I must seek a way of casting light,
one small bird unto the sky,
the colour red in your flight.
A humming bird—a revolving wheel,
casting images by the light.

Direction Home

I got out and opened up my right of way,
through crags and sowed-out ground
miles of salt water and red clay.

I am no longer sickened by death,
I find my habits within these acres
within these waters.

Like a rainbow trout slipping
into a standing pool centuries from now.

Field Work

This day is my kiss
in the corner of an hour
I can find slippery blackness.

The sun is my eye
out over the lands scouring
the shores of reason.

Seeking arguments in clay
finding syntax in the cliffs.

A system of Aesthetics

A single butterfly lands,
the word is furtive light
his wings are keyholes into a kiss.

Poetry is also a storm

Twenty five years from now I am standing in this kitchen,
making little worlds out of glass and feathers.

Backwards moving backwards towards the storm
submerged in Bay du Vin
between seaweed and kelp, mussels and clay.

Look out the window, iron rod in the yellow burst
red dye spreading into what won't let up or catch up
for rain and now that it's here nothing says stop. Nothing.

Formal lessons

A wave breaking on a rock
breaking form so as to turn back
into the slopping of the sea.

Anecdote of the Epicenter

Cartoon figures walk down the pier
where the trout are dying in fractured form
one on top of the other
like birch bark thread in a woven basket,
intertwined, waves slapping drift wood
as something about a shipwreck.

The night sets in
and I can no longer take solace in the golden moon.
I look into the epicenter—
small little crystal of blue flame.

Today

If the morning is harder,
closer to the clock,
days come.

Days come, ticking,
what will be lost
what recovered.

The light is at
the window
white.

The sun
yellow lines
across blue sky.

On the beach
I watch the spirals
of glittering waves.

This sound I follow
into my mind
and echoes,

like light
let light
be relief.

Circumference

The moon is empty
frozen land,
quiet land
of long night.

Everything is still,
at certain time
like the many things
that go in life.

Old land of oil lamps
and blackened edges
inside this prison
a flame flickers.

I will live in the eye of this fire.
Now a torch, a lighthouse
for those who've lost their way.

At the Water's Edge

I am woven into a fabric
the feathers of a dove
fly away and land
in that placeless heaven