

Letter 260  
(15 April 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Mr Higginson,

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?  
The Mind is so near itself — it cannot see, distinctly — and I have none to ask —  
[...]

261  
(25 April 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*  
Mr Higginson,

Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude — but I was ill — and write today, from my pillow.  
Thank you for the surgery — it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others — as you ask —  
though they might not differ —  
While my thought is undressed — I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown — they  
look alike, and numb.  
You asked how old I was? I made no verse — but one or two — until this winter — Sir —  
I had a terror — since September — I could tell to none — and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying  
Ground — because I am afraid — You inquire my Books — For Poets — I have Keats — and Mr and  
Mrs Browning. For Prose — Mr Ruskin — Sir Thomas Browne — and the Revelations. I went to school  
— but in your manner of the phrase — had no education. When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me  
Immortality — but venturing too near, himself — he never returned — Soon after, my Tutor, died — and  
for several years, my Lexicon — was my only companion — Then I found one more — but he was not  
contented I be his scholar — so he left the Land.  
You ask of my Companions Hills — Sir — and the Sundown — and a Dog — large as myself, that my  
Father bought me — They are better than Beings — because they know — but do not tell—and the noise  
in the Pool, at Noon — excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister — My Mother does not care for  
thought — and Father, too busy with his Briefs — to notice what we do — He buys me many Books —  
but begs me not to read them — because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious — except me  
— and address an Eclipse, every morning — whom they call their “Father.” But I fear my story fatigues  
you — I would like to learn — Could you tell me how to grow — or is it unconveyed — like Melody —  
or Witchcraft?  
You speak of Mr Whitman — I never read his Book — but was told that he was disgraceful —  
I read Miss Prescott’s “Circumstance,” but it followed me, in the Dark — so I avoided her —  
Two Editors of Journals came to my Father’s House, this winter— and asked me for my Mind — and  
when I asked them “Why,” they said I was penurious — and they, would use it for the World —  
I could not weigh myself — Myself—  
My size felt small — to me — I read your Chapters in the Atlantic — and experienced honor for you — I  
was sure you would not reject a confiding question —  
Is this — Sir — what you asked me to tell you?

Your friend,  
E — Dickinson.

265  
(7 June 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Dear friend.

Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before — Domingo comes but once — yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue —

[...]

Your second letter surprised me, and for a moment, swung — I had not supposed it. Your first — gave no dishonor, because the True — are not ashamed — I thanked you for your justice — but could not drop the Bells whose jingling cooled my Tramp — Perhaps the Balm, seemed better, because you bled me, first. I smile when you suggest that I delay “to publish” — that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—

If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her — if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase — and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me — then—My Barefoot—Rank is better — You think my gait “spasmodic” — I am in danger — Sir — You think me “uncontrolled” — I have no Tribunal.

Would you have time to be the “friend” you should think I need? I have a little shape — it would not crowd your Desk — nor make much Racket as the Mouse, that dents your Galleries —

If I might bring you what I do — not so frequent to trouble you — and ask you if I told it clear — ‘twould be control, to me —

The Sailor cannot see the North — but knows the Needle can —

The “hand you stretch me in the Dark,” I put mine in, and turn away — I have no Saxon, now —

[...]

But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson?

Your friend  
E Dickinson—

268  
(July 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Could you believe me — without? I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur — and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves — Would this do just as well?

[...]

Will you tell me my fault, frankly as to yourself, for I had rather wince, than die. Men do not call the surgeon, to commend — the Bone, but to set it, Sir, and fracture within, is more critical. And for this, Preceptor, I shall bring you — Obedience — the Blossom from my Garden, and every gratitude I know. Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that — My Business is Circumference — An ignorance, not of Customs, but if caught with the Dawn — or the Sunset see me — Myself the only Kangaroo among the

Beauty, Sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought that instruction would take it away.  
[...]

Your Scholar

271  
(August 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Dear friend —

Are these more orderly? I thank you for the Truth —  
I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize — my little Force  
explodes — and leaves me bare and charred —  
I think you called me “Wayward.” Will you help me improve?  
I supposed the pride that stops the Breath, in the Core of Woods, is not of Ourselves —  
You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large — Because I can see Orthography — but the  
Ignorance out of sight — is my Preceptor’s charge —  
Of “shunning Men and Women” — they talk of Hallowed things, aloud — and embarrass my Dog — He  
and I don’t object to them, if they’ll exist their side. I think Carl[o] would please you — He is dumb, and  
brave — I think you would like the Chestnut Tree, I met in my walk. It hit my notice suddenly — and I  
thought the Skies were in Blossom —  
Then there’s a noiseless noise in the Orchard — that I let persons hear — You told me in one letter, you  
could not come to see me, “now,” and I made no answer, not because I had none, but did not think myself  
the price that you should come so far —  
I do not ask so large a pleasure, lest you might deny me —  
You say “Beyond your knowledge.” You would not jest with me, because I believe you — but Preceptor  
— you cannot mean it? All men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion —  
When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a  
poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer  
of me, than I could be of them, so I hav’n’t that confidence in fraud which many exercise.  
I shall observe your precept — though I don’t understand it, always.  
I marked a line in One Verse — because I met it after I made it — and never consciously touch a paint,  
mixed by another person—  
I do not let go it, because it is mine.  
Have you the portrait of Mrs Browning? Persons sent me three — If you had none, will you have mine?

Your Scholar —

274  
(6 October 1862)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Did I displease you, Mr Higginson?  
But wont you tell me how?

Your friend,  
E. Dickinson —

280  
(February 1863)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Amherst

Dear friend

[...]  
Should you, before this reaches you, experience immortality, who will inform me of the Exchange? Could you, with honor, avoid Death, I entreat you — Sir — It would bereave

Your Gnome —

290  
(Cambridge, early June 1864)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Dear friend,

Are you in danger —  
I did not know that you were hurt. Will you tell me more? Mr Hawthorne died.  
I was ill since September, and since April, in Boston, for a Physician's care — He does not let me go, yet I work in my Prison, and make Guests for myself —  
Carlo did not come, because that he would die, in Jail, and the Mountains, I could not hold now, so i brought but the Gods —  
I wish to see you more than before I failed — Will you tell me your health?  
[...]

Can you render my Pencil?  
The Physician has taken away my Pen.  
I enclose the address from a letter, lest my figures fail — Knowledge of your recovery — would excel my own —

E— Dickinson

314  
(late January 1866)  
*T. W. Higginson*

Carlo died —  
E. Dickinson  
Would you instruct me now?

323  
(mid—July 1867)  
*T. W. Higginson*  
Bringing still my “plea for Culture.”  
Would it teach me now?

Amherst

330

(June 1869)

*T. W. Higginson*

Dear friend

A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone — I would like to thank you for your great kindness but never try to lift the words which I cannot hold. Should you come to Amherst, I might then succeed, though Gratitude is the timid wealth of those who have nothing. I am sure that you speak the truth, because the noble do, but your letters always surprise me. My life has been too simple and stern to embarrass any.

“Seen of Angels” scarcely my responsibility

It is difficult not to be fictitious in so fair a place, but test”s severe repairs are permitted all.

When a little Girl I remember hearing that remarkable passage and preferring the “Power,” now knowing at the time that “Kingdom” and “Glory” were included.

You noticed my dwelling alone — To an Emigrant, Country is idle except it be his own. You speak kindly of seeing me. Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town.

Of our greatest acts we are ignorant —

You were not aware that you saved my Life. To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests. The child that asks my flower “Will you,” he says — “Will you” — and so to ask for what I want I know no other way.

You will excuse each that I say, because no other taught me?

330a

(June 1869)

*[T. W. Higginson to ED]*

Dickinson

Dear friend

Sometimes I take out your letters & verses, dear friend, and when I feel their strange power, it is not strange that I find it hard to write & that long months pass. I have the greatest desire to see you, always feeling that perhaps if I could once take you by the hand I might be something to you; but till then you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist & I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles of light. Every year I think that I will contrive somehow to go to Amherst & see you: but that is hard, for I often am obliged to go away for lecturing, &c & rarely can go for pleasure. I would gladly go to Boston, at any practicable time, to meet you. I am always the same toward you, & never relax my interest in what you send to me. I should like to hear from you very often, but feel always timid lest what I *write* should be badly aimed & miss that fine edge of thought which you bear. It would be so easy, I fear, to miss you. Still, you see, I try. I think if I could once see you & know that you are real, I might fare better. It brought you nearer e[ven] to know that you had an actual [?] uncle, though I can hardly fancy [any?] two beings less alike than yo[u] [&?] him. But I have not seen him [for] several years, though I have seen [a lady] who once knew you, but could [not] tell me much.

It is hard [for me] to understand how you can live s[o alo]ne, with thoughts of such a [quali]ty coming up in you & even the companionship of your dog withdrawn. Yet it isolates one anywhere to think beyond a certain point or have such luminous flashes as come to you — so perhaps the palce does not make much difference.

You must come down to Boston sometimes? All ladies do. I wonder if it would be possible to lure you [to] the meetings on the 3<sup>d</sup> Monday of every month at Mrs. [Sa]rgent's 13 Chestnut St. at 10 am — when somebody reads [a] paper & others talk or listen. Next Monday Mr. Emerson [rea]ds & then at 3<sup>½</sup> P.M. there is a meeting of the Woman's [Cl]ub at 3 Tremont Place, where I read a paper on the [Gre]ek goddesses. That would be a good time for you to come [alth]ough I should still rather have you on some [da]y when I shall not be so much taken up — for my object is to see you, more than to entertain you. I shall be in Boston also during anniversary week, June 25\* & 28, — or will the Musical Festival in June tempt you down. You see I am in earnest. Or don't you need sea air in summer. Write & tell me something in prose or verse, & I will be less fastidious in future & willing to write clumsy things, rather than none.

Ever your friend  
[signature cut out]

\* There is an extra meeting at Mrs. Sargent's that day & Mr. Weiss reads an essay. I have a right to invite you & you can merely ring & walk in.

342  
(16 August 1870)  
T. W. Higginson

Dear friend

I will be at Home and glad.  
I think you said the 15<sup>th</sup>. The incredible never surprises us because it is the incredible.

E. Dickinson

342a  
*Higginson wrote his wife that evening*

Amherst/Tuesday 10 P.M.

I shan't sit up tonight to write you all about E.D. dearest but if you had read Mrs. Stoddard's novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves. Yet I only saw her.

A large county lawyer's house, brown brick, with great trees & a garden — I sent up my card. A parlor dark & cool & stiffish, a few books & engravings & an open piano — Malbone & O D [Out Door] Paper among other books.

A step like a pattering child's in entry & in glided a little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair & a face a little like Belle Dove's; not plainer — with no good feature — in a very plain & exquisitely clean white pique & a blue net worsted shawl. She came to me with two day lilies which she put in a sort of childlike way into my hand & said "These are my introduction" in a soft frightened breathless childlike voice — & added under her breath Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers & hardly know what I say — but she talked soon & thenceforward continuously — & deferentially — sometimes stopping to ask me to talk instead of her — but readily recommencing.

Manner between Angie Tilton & Mr. Alcott — but thoroughly ingenuous & simple which they are not & saying many things which you would have thought foolish & I wise — & some things you wd. hv. liked. I add a few over the page.

This is a lovely place, at least the view Hills everywhere, hardly mountains. I saw Dr. Stearns the Pres't of

College — but the janitor cd. not be found to show me into the building I may try again tomorrow. I called on Mrs. Banfield & saw her five children — She looks much like H. H. *when ill* & was very cordial & friendly. Good night darling I am very sleep & do good to write you this much. Thine am I

I got here at 2 & leave at 9. E.D. dreamed all night of *you* (not me) & next day got my letter proposing to come here!! She only knew of you through a mention in my notice of Charlotte Hawes.

“Women talk: men are silent: that is why I dread women.”

“My father only reads on Sunday — he reads *lonely & rigorous* books.”

“If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way.”

“How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning”

“When I lost the use of my Eyes it was a comfort to think there were so few real books that I could easily find some one to read me all of them”

“Truth is such a rare thing it is delightful to tell it.”

“I find ecstasy in living — the mere sense of living is joy enough”

I asked if she never felt want to employment, never going off the place & never seeing any visitor “I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time” (& added) “I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough.” She makes all the bread for her father only likes hers & says “& people must have puddings” this very dreamily, as if they were comets — so she makes them.

*[That evening Higginson made this entry in his diary:]*

To Amherst, arrived there at 2 Saw Prest Stearns, Mrs. Banfield & Miss Dickinson (twice) a remarkable experience, quite equalling my expectation. A pleasant country town, unspeakably quiet in the summer aftn.

342b

*Next day he wrote his wife again*

Wednesday noon

I am stopping for dinner at White River Junction, dearest, & in a few hours shall be at Littleton thence to go to Bethlehem. This morning at 9 I left Amherst & sent you a letter last night. I shall mail this at L. putting with it another sheet about E.D. that is in my valise.

She said to me at parting “Gratitude is the only secret that cannot reveal itself.”

I talked with Prest Stearns of Amherst about her — & found him a very pleasant companion in the cars. Before leaving today, I got in to the Museums & enjoyed them much; saw a meteoric stone almost as long as my arm & weighing 436 lbs! a big slice of some other planet. I fell in Colorado. The collection of bird tracks of extinct birds in stone is very wonderful & unique & other good things. I saw Mr. Dickinson this morning a little — thing dry & speechless — I saw what her life has been. Dr. S. says her sister is proud of her.

I wd. have stolen a *totty* meteor, dear but they were under glass.

Mrs. Bullard I have just met in this train with spouse & son — I shall ride up with her.

Some pretty glimpses of mts. but all is dry and burnt I never saw the river at Brattleboro so low.

Did I say I staid at Sargents in Boston & she still hopes for Newport.

This picture of Mrs Browning's tomb is from E.D. "Timothy Titcomb" [Dr. Holland] gave it to her. I think I will mail this here as I hv. found time to write so much. I miss you little woman & wish you were here but you'd hate travelling.

Ever

E D again

"Could you tell me what home is"

"I never had a mother. I supposed a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled."

"I never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15. My father thought he had taught me but I did not understand & I was afraid to say I did not & afraid to ask any one else lest he should know."

Her father was not severe I should think but remote. He did not wish them to read anything but the Bible.

One day her brother brought home Kavanagh hid it under the piano cover & made signs to her & they read it: her father at least found it & was displeased. Perhaps it was before this that a student of his was amazed that they had never heard of Mrs. [Lydia Maria] Child & used to bring them books & hide in a bush by the door. They were then little things in short dresses with their feet on the rungs of the chair.

After the first book she thought in ecstasy "This then is a book! And there are more of them!"

"Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?"

Major Hunt interested her more than any man she ever saw. She remembered two things he said — that her great dog "understood gravitation" & when he said he should come again "in a year. If I say a shorter time it will be longer."

When I said I would come again *some time* she said "Say in a long time, that will be nearer. Some time is nothing."

After long disuse of her eyes she read Shakespeare & thought why is any other book needed.

I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her. She often thought me tired & seemed very thoughtful of others.

*[The postscript of a letter Higginson wrote his sisters on Sunday, 21 August, adds:]*

Of course I hv. enjoyed my trip very very much. In Amherst I had a nice aftn & evng with my singular poetic correspondent & the remarkable cabinets of the College.

*[Recalling the interview twenty years later, Higginson wrote in the "Atlantic Monthly" LXVIII (October 1891) 453:]*

The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life.

Perhaps in time I could have got beyond that somewhat overstrained relation which not my will, but her needs, had forced upon us. Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and every-day comradeship; but it was not altogether easy. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson.