

TEXTS

By Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911)
Adapted by Mark Campbell (b. 1953) and Eric Nathan (b. 1983)

(Note: The source of each text is cited in the footnotes. In many cases, the text used in the libretto has been adapted from the original, with the frequent omission of words for dramatic and artistic purposes. However, the words used have not been altered from the original, except in rare cases, which are noted in the footnotes. Emily Dickinson's poetry is given below in italics).

PART I

I. To tell me what is true?

[Dickinson letter to Higginson, received April 16, 1862; and Higginson's commentary in "Emily Dickinson's Letters," in the *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891]¹

DICKINSON:

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.
Should you think it breathed,
And had you the leisure to tell me,
I should feel quick gratitude.

HIGGINSON:

The letter was postmarked "Amherst,"
In a handwriting so peculiar
As if the writer might have taken her first lessons
By studying fossil bird-tracks.

DICKINSON:

If I make the mistake,
That you dared to tell me
Would give me sincerer honor toward you.

HIGGINSON:

Of punctuation there was little;
She used chiefly dashes
But the most curious thing
Was the total absence of a signature.
As if the shy writer wished to recede
As far as possible from view
—in pencil, not in ink.

¹ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

DICKINSON:
I inclose my name, asking you,
If you please, sir,
To tell me what is true?

HIGGINSON:
The name was Emily Dickinson.

DICKINSON:
That you will not betray me
It is needless to ask,
Since honor is its own pawn.

II. The nearest dream recedes unrealized

HIGGINSON:
Inclosed in the letter were poems.
One with an aerial lift
that bears the ear upward with the bee it traces

DICKINSON:
*The nearest dream recedes unrealized.
The heaven we chase,
Like the June bee
Before the schoolboy,
Invites the race,
Stoops to an easy clover,
Dips—evades—teases—deploys—
Then to the royal clouds
Lifts his light pinnacle,
Heedless of the boy
Staring, bewildered, at the mocking sky.
Homesick for steadfast honey,—
Ah! The bee flies not
Which brews that rare variety.*

HIGGINSON:
The bee himself did not evade the schoolboy
More than she evaded me;
It is hard to say what answer was made by me—
I remember to have ventured on some criticism...

III. Could you tell me how to grow?

[Letter to T. W. Higginson, received April 26, 1862]²

DICKINSON:

Mr. Higginson,
Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude,
But I was ill, and write to-day 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.
I would like to learn.
Could you tell me how to grow,
Or is it unconveyed, like melody or witchcraft?

HIGGINSON/DICKINSON:

Your friend,
E. Dickinson.

IV. They shut me up in Prose

[Poem, "They shut me up in Prose," ca. 1862]³

DICKINSON:

*They shut me up in Prose—
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet—
Because they liked me "still"—
Still! Could themself have peeped—
And seen my Brain- go round—
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason—in the Pound—
Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity—
And laugh—No more have I—*

² Adapted from Emily Dickinson, published in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

³ Reprinted with permission from Harvard University Press. THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965, by Mary L. Hampson.

[Essay, "Repression at Long Range"]⁴

HIGGINSON:

The most gifted woman,
Is like a single plant
Trying to sustain itself
Where the soil is not yet fitted for its reception,
And it is only in some favored nook
That it manages to exist at all.

V. My barefoot rank is better

[Letter to Higginson, received June 8, 1862]⁵

DICKINSON:

Dear Friend,
I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion,
And if I tried to thank you, my tears would block my tongue.
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,
My barefoot rank is better.
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.

PART II

VI. To see if we were growing

[From "Introduction," in *Army Life in a Black Regiment*] ⁶

HIGGINSON:

I did not seek the command
Of colored troops,
But it sought me.
I had always looked for the arming of the blacks,
I had been an abolitionist too long,
And had known and loved John Brown too well,
Not to feel a thrill of joy
At last on finding myself

⁴ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Repression at Long Range," in *Concerning All of Us* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1982), 204.

⁵ Adapted from Emily Dickinson, published in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

⁶ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Introduction," in *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Army Life in A Black Regiment*, 4–7. University of California: Riverside Press, 1900.

In the position where he only wished to be.
I obtained from the War Department,
Permission to report to General Saxton,
Thenceforth my lot was cast
Altogether with the black troops,
Mine lay among hundred men
Suddenly transformed
From slaves into soldiers
A battalion of black soldiers
A spectacle since so common
Seemed then the most daring of innovations.
I felt sometimes as if
We were a plant trying to take root
But constantly pulled up
To see if we were growing.

VII. War feels to me an oblique place

[Letter to Higginson, received in the winter of 1862–3]⁷

DICKINSON:

Dear Friend,
I should have liked to see you before you became improbable.
War feels to me an oblique place.
Should there be other summers,
Would you perhaps come?
Should you,
Before this reaches you,
Experience immortality,
Who will inform me of the exchange?

HIGGINSON/DICKINSON:

Your Gnome.

VIII. There suddenly arose

[Diary entry from the evening of January 1, 1863]⁸

HIGGINSON:

The President's Emancipation Proclamation was read.
There suddenly arose
A strong male voice
Cracked and elderly
Into which two women's voices instantly blended,
Singing,
As if by an impulse

⁷ Emily Dickinson, published in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

⁸ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Army Life in A Black Regiment*, 54–56. University of California: Riverside Press, 1900.

That could no more be repressed
Than the morning note of the song-sparrow.—
I never saw anything so electric;
It made all other words cheap;
It seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed.
After it was ended,
Tears were everywhere.
These souls burst out in their lay, as if they were by their own hearths at home!

IX. Emancipation

[Poem, “No rack can torture me,” ca. 1862.

Titled “Emancipation” in Todd/Higginson publication, 1890]⁹

DICKINSON:

Emancipation
No rack can torture me,
My soul's at liberty
Behind this mortal bone
There knits a bolder one
You cannot prick with saw,
Nor rend with scymitar.
Two bodies therefore be;
Bind one, and one will flee.
The eagle of his nest
No easier divest
And gain the sky,
Than mayest thou,
Except thyself may be
Thine enemy;
Captivity is consciousness,
So's liberty.

X. All sounds ceased

[From “Up the St. Mary’s,” in *Army Life in a Black Regiment*]¹⁰

HIGGINSON:

It was after midnight.
The moonlight—
The woods—
Drew a pistol—
Took aim—
“Charge in upon them! Surround them!”
Confused—

⁹ *Poems by Emily Dickinson. Edited by Two of Her Friends, Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson. [First Series.] Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890.*

¹⁰ Fragments excerpted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Army Life in A Black Regiment*, 100, 109. University of California: Riverside Press, 1900.

Rifle-shots—
Advancing guard—
A man fell at my elbow—
As if a tree had fallen—
Confusion—
Scattering—
Firing rapidly—
Hail-storm of bullets
Pattered precisely
Upon the iron cannon—
I gave the order—
All sounds ceased—
And left us in peaceful possession of the field.

XI. There came a wind like a bugle

[Poem (excerpted), "There came a wind like a bugle," no date;¹¹
Poem (full), "They dropped like Flakes," ca. 1862¹²]

DICKINSON:

*There came a wind like a bugle;
It quivered through the grass,
And a green chill upon the heat
So ominous did pass*

*They dropped like Flakes—
They dropped like Stars—
Like Petals from a Rose—
When suddenly across the June
A Wind with fingers— goes—
They perished in the Seamless Grass—
No eye could find the place—
But God can summon every face
On his Repealless— List.*

XII. Attending to the wounded

[From "Up the St. Mary's," in *Army Life in a Black Regiment*]¹³

HIGGINSON:

Attending to the wounded—
Making stretchers for those to be carried—

¹¹ Excerpted from manuscript, Amherst College, no. 458. (www.edickinson.org)

¹² Reprinted with permission from Harvard University Press. THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965, by Mary L. Hampson.

¹³ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Army Life in A Black Regiment*, 102-104. University of California: Riverside Press, 1900.

One man killed instantly by ball through the heart—
Seven wounded,
One of whom will die.
Another, with three wounds—
One of which may cost him his life
Would not report himself till compelled to do so by his officers.
While dressing his wounds, he quietly talked of what they had done,
And of what they yet could do.
He is perfectly quiet and cool,
But takes this whole affair with the religious bearing
Of a man who realizes that freedom is sweeter than life.

[Poem, "A death-blow is a life-blow to some," 1865]¹⁴

DICKINSON:

*A death-blow is a life-blow to some;
Who, till they died, did not alive become;
Who, had they lived, had died,
But when they died, vitality begun.*

XIII. That shamed the nation

[From "Conclusion," in *Army Life in a Black Regiment*]¹⁵

HIGGINSON:

We had touched the pivot of the war.
Whether this vast and dusky mass
Should prove the weakness of the nation or its strength,
Must depend in great measure,
We knew, upon our efforts.
Till the blacks were armed,
There was no guaranty of their freedom.
It was their demeanor under arms
That shamed the nation into recognizing them as men.

PART III

XIV. These are my introduction

[Letter to Higginson, no date, prior to August 16, 1870]¹⁶

DICKINSON:

Dear Friend,
You were not aware that you saved my life.
To thank you in person has been since then one of my few requests.

¹⁴ Emily Dickinson, published in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

¹⁵ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Army Life in A Black Regiment*, 359. University of California: Riverside Press, 1900.

¹⁶ Emily Dickinson, published in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

[From Higginson's commentary "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891]¹⁷

HIGGINSON:

At last after many postponements,
On August 16, 1870,
I found myself face to face
With my hitherto unseen correspondent
At her father's house.
I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep
Like that of a child, in the hall,
And in glided, almost noiselessly,
A plain shy little person, with eyes,
As she herself, said,

HIGGINSON/DICKINSON:

"Like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass,"

HIGGINSON:

She came toward me with two day lilies

DICKINSON:

These are my introduction
Forgive me if I am frightened.
I never see strangers
And hardly know what I say

HIGGINSON:

But soon she began to talk— almost constantly—

DICKINSON:

If I read a book and it makes
My whole body so cold
No fire can ever warm me,
I know that is poetry.

HIGGINSON:

Interspersed with these confidences
Came phrases—
Putting into words what the most extravagant
Might possibly think without saying.

DICKINSON:

If I feel physically as if
The top of my head were taken off,
I know that is poetry.

HIGGINSON:

We met only once again

¹⁷ Adapted from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1891.

We corresponded for years
She sometimes enclosed¹⁸ flowers
Or fragrant leaves
With a verse or two.

XV. My Wars are laid away in Books / No Prisoner be
[Poem, "My Wars are laid away in Books," no date]¹⁹

DICKINSON:

*My Wars are laid away in Books—
I have one Battle more—
A Foe whom I have never seen
But oft has scanned me o'er—
And hesitated me between
And others at my side,
But chose the best— Neglecting me—till
All the rest, have died—
How sweet if I am not forgot
By Chums that passed away—
Since Playmates at threescore and ten
Are such a scarcity—*

HIGGINSON:

My Wars are laid away in Books—

DICKINSON:

My Wars are laid away in Books—

[Poem, "No Prisoner be," ca. 1863]²⁰

DICKINSON/HIGGINSON:

*No Prisoner be—
Where Liberty—
Himself—abide with Thee.*

¹⁸ Tense changed from the original.

¹⁹ Reprinted with permission from Harvard University Press. THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965, by Mary L. Hampson.

²⁰ Reprinted with permission from Harvard University Press. THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942, by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965, by Mary L. Hampson.