



MONDAY

# Emily Dickinson's Windows

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) lived in a house abundantly furnished with windows. Approximately seventy-five adorned the exterior of the Homestead, the Dickinson family's Federal-style residence in Amherst, Massachusetts (fig. 1). There were nineteen on the south façade, eleven on the north, twenty-two on the east, and twenty-three on the west. These included French windows, conservatory windows, and cupola windows. There were even two internal windows that looked out from one room into another.<sup>1</sup> Windows permeated Dickinson's deeply interior life. What did these windows mean to her? How might they have shaped her poetry? What can be recovered of her world by our engagement with her windows today?

Dickinson's interactions with windows were numerous and richly associative throughout her lifetime, suffused with playful imagination, ritualistic significance, and strong emotional attachment. She loved her windows, and she loved writing about them. In a letter to her friend Mary Bowles in the winter of 1859, the poet wrote, "I cannot walk to the distant friends on nights piercing as these, so I put both hands on the window-pane, and try to think how birds fly, and imitate, and fail."<sup>2</sup> To her friend Elizabeth Holland in 1884, Dickinson reported, "I have made a permanent Rainbow by filling a Window with Hyacinths."<sup>3</sup> And in a letter to her cousin Louise Norcross, the poet described how a fly hopping from pane to pane on her window created cheerful musical notes on the glass, as though performing "a sort of speck piano."<sup>4</sup> Dickinson even

*The Dickinson  
Homestead, Amherst,  
Massachusetts (detail,  
see fig. 1).*









1  
*The Dickinson  
 Homestead, Amherst,  
 Massachusetts, 1858*  
 (detail). Photographic  
 print, 9  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 7  $\frac{5}{8}$  in.  
 (24.5 × 19.2 cm).  
 Manuscripts and  
 Archives, Yale University  
 Library, New Haven,  
 Connecticut. Todd-  
 Bingham Picture Collec-  
 tion, MS 496E.

decorated her windows with plants and flowers: “Today is very cold,” she wrote to Mary Bowles one winter day, “yet have I much boquet upon the window pane of moss and fern.”<sup>5</sup> Whenever Dickinson’s brother, Austin, was about to return home from his teaching post in Boston, Dickinson would clean his room, drawing the “long closed blinds” from his windows, sweeping away “each spider down from its home so high.”<sup>6</sup>

When it came to her poetry, Dickinson used the window as both metaphor and prop. In one of her most famous poems, Dickinson cites poetry as a form of creative expression superior to prose, for poetry, which she nicknames “Possibility,” contains more windows and better doors, allowing for greater interpretive traffic and therefore greater possibilities of meaning:



*I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –*

*Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –*

*Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –  
(Fr 466)<sup>7</sup>*

As these verses suggest, Dickinson metaphorically associated windows with creative freedom and ecstasy. Yet she also used the window in her poetry in a more literal way, as an architectural prop to frame descriptions of nature or town. “By my Window have I for Scenery,” she begins one composition, before proceeding to elaborate on what that scenery is: “Just a Sea – with a Stem – / If the Bird and the Farmer – deem it a ‘Pine’ – / The Opinion will do – for them –” (Fr 849). Another poem begins, “The Angle of a Landscape – / That every time I wake – / Between my Curtain and the Wall,” before it goes on to list precisely what is visible in that slanted bedside view between the curtain and the wall: “a Bough of Apples,” “The Pattern of a Chimney,” “The Forehead of a Hill,” “a Vane’s Forefinger” (Fr 578). Dickinson used old envelopes as writing surfaces, and some of them, when their pointed flaps were opened, resembled windows with their curtains drawn back, their four sides framing words she had scrawled across the space where the landscape would be.<sup>8</sup> When we hold these envelope-poems in our hands, pulling aside the flaps to read what is written underneath or within, we combine the aesthetic act of reading a poem with the mundane domestic gesture of drawing curtains—art and housekeeping combined, the former giving the latter an aura of aesthetic sacredness, the latter giving the former a feeling of earthly routine simplicity.

But the window had more to offer Dickinson’s poetry than the role of metaphor and prop. At times it functioned like a magic lens. When Dickinson had her windows closed, she saw a completely

different Amherst. Most domestic window glass in the nineteenth century had wavy, uneven surfaces that, when one looked through it, visually transformed everyday surroundings into spectacular forms. The 1944 photograph by Paul Strand (1890–1976) of the sash window of an abandoned New England house captures some of the mesmerizing visual effects produced by early American window glass (fig. 2). The inherent imperfections in nineteenth-century window glass—residual particles of silica or clay, tiny bubbles, waving bands—distorted nature’s familiar objects into fantastical patterns. The panes in Strand’s photograph appear more liquid than solid, and the tree branches reflected on them become frenetic, ink-like skeins. Although the glass of Dickinson’s windows was of a finer grade and quality than the window glass in Strand’s photograph, the smokiness reflected in the panes of Dickinson’s windows suggests their period kinship to those of Strand’s window and its wilder reflected forms (fig. 3). When we study such glass up close, nature can seem to liquefy and dapple on the panes, like the reflection in a still pool that has been disturbed by wind (fig. 4).

Peering through such strangely textured glass meant seeing a world whose structures were momentarily “let loose.” The landscape, houses, birds, and trees appear to unravel from their familiar guises, scrambled by the panes’ uneven surfaces into wondrously fluid designs. As the poet’s niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, recalls in her memoirs, her aunt Emily’s writing desk was oriented toward the windows to gain natural light and advantageous views; we can imagine Dickinson sitting there, alternately looking down at the sheet of paper on her desk and gazing through her windows, this frequent back-and-forth attention resulting in a conceptual and visual overlap between her poems and windows.<sup>9</sup> Dickinson’s windows may have thus served as formal analogues to some of her poems. And indeed, the physical world we find in many of Dickinson’s poems, especially her landscape compositions, is redolent of the visual distortions created by the warps in nineteenth-century window glass. In such a world, sunrises unfurl color by color and views of the landscape appear in incremental fragments:

*A Slash of Blue! A Sweep of Gray!  
Some scarlet patches – on the way –  
Compose an evening sky –  
A little Purple – slipped between –  
Some Ruby Trowsers – hurried on –*

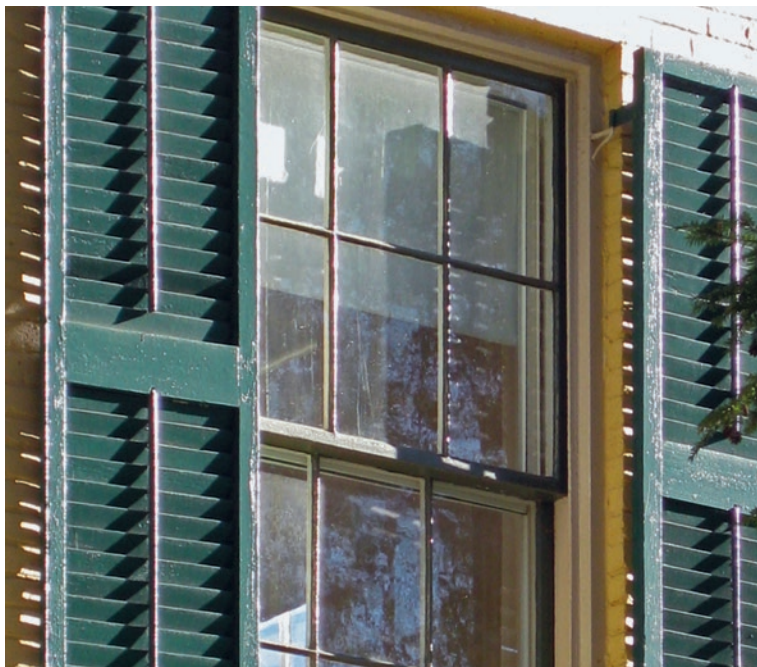
2  
Paul Strand, *Workshop Window, Stockburger's Farm, East Jamaica, Vermont*, 1944. Gelatin silver print, 9<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (24.4 × 19.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Paul Strand Collection, purchased with funds contributed by Drs. Betty and Harry Gottlieb and family, 2010-14-126.







3  
One of Dickinson's  
four bedroom windows  
on the second floor  
of the Dickinson  
Homestead, Amherst,  
Massachusetts, 2011.  
Author's photograph.



4  
Detail of nineteenth-  
century window  
glass, 2012. Author's  
photograph.



*A Wave of Gold – a Bank of Day –  
This just makes out the morning sky!  
(Fr 233)*

*I'll tell you how the Sun rose –  
A Ribbon at a time –  
The Steeples swam in Amethyst –  
The news, like Squirrels, ran –  
The Hills untied their Bonnets –  
The Bobolinks – begun –  
Then I said softly to myself –  
“That must have been the Sun”!  
(Fr 204)*

If the richly textured surfaces of the glass lent a fluid quality to Dickinson's poems, then the window's grid frame may likewise have influenced her poetry's frequent gridded rhythm and structure. The majority of the Homestead windows were of the standard double-hung sash format commonly found in early to mid-nineteenth-century Federal-style residences; such frames often featured six panes on the upper sash and six panes on the lower sash, making overall a twelve-unit grid. The formal structure and temporal denouement of many of Dickinson's compositions bear this pattern of a divisible grid — “a grid of time, space, and temperature, voiced in notches, gauges, degrees, steps, and plunges,” as the poetry critic Helen Vendler puts it. “The poet maps these templates or grids one upon another,” Vendler writes, “enabling her to leap from plane to plane.”<sup>10</sup> This is true of numerous Dickinson compositions in which each word, line, or stanza is a well-defined degree, notch, slot, or “pane” that spotlights a single image, emotional state, or quality of experience; these units or increments — as single words, as lines, as stanzas — together form the grid(s) of the poem. As an entirety, the momentum these grids create is that of a sequence or series of “jumps” from one state to another, like hopping from one windowpane to the next, as the poem progresses from beginning to end. An insect hopping from pane to pane on Dickinson's windows would be perfectly trained to the rhythm and structure of her poems.

Three extracts here will suffice to illustrate the common grid effect in Dickinson's verses:

*The Heart asks Pleasure – first –  
And then – excuse the Pain –*

*And then – those little Anodynes  
That deaden suffering –  
And then – to go to sleep –  
And then – if it should be  
The will of its Inquisitor  
The privilege to die –  
(Fr 588)*

*From Blank to Blank –  
A Threadless Way  
I pushed Mechanic feet –  
To stop – or perish – or advance –  
Alike indifferent –  
(Fr 484)*

*'Tis this – invites – appalls – endows –  
Flits – glimmers – proves – dissolves –  
Returns – suggests – convicts – enchants  
Then – flings in Paradise –  
(Fr 285)*

The “And thens” of the first poem perform the demarcating function of window muntins, while in the second poem the divisions are conveyed through leaps from one “Blank” to another and through the image of “Mechanic feet” shuffling along a “Threadless Way.” The third composition illustrates how Dickinson’s prolific dashes also often carry out the work of division by orthographically separating words and lines. As these examples demonstrate, the technique of sequential demarcation can vary from poem to poem, but this divisional plotting within a grid recurs in Dickinson’s oeuvre. Her poetry is therefore not only grid-like in the way Vendler has suggested but specifically window-like in echoing the design of the poet’s windows.

But although the term “grid” aptly reflects the unfolding sequential rhythm and compact structure of Dickinson’s poems, the activity of “undoing” best describes what occurs within that structure’s tidy form. The activity or image housed within each well-defined unit of the grid is often that of nature loosening up, melting into pure releases of color. Dickinson herself might describe this formal juxtaposition of a neat frame outlining a formless center as “A Diagram – of Rapture!” (Fr 212). Dickinson’s windows might also be described as diagrams of rapture: within each pane, a part of the landscape unwinds from its



usual composed appearance. The sun sets in washes, and the evening sky arrives in floods of extravagant color: “This – is the land – Sunset washes – / These – are the Banks of the Yellow Sea – / Where it rose – or whither it rushes – / These – are the Western Mystery!” (Fr 297). At times, the landscape “undresses” itself by taking off its garments: “The Day undressed – Herself / Her Garter – was of Gold – / Her Petticoat of Purple – plain – / Her Dimities as old” (Fr 495). Nature seems in the midst of jubilant self-abandon within the gridded frame. In the following poem dated 1862, nature is a spirited housewife whose carefree sweeping of the evening sky drops loose shreds of color throughout the landscape. Purple fibers land on one pane, amber threads fall onto another, and scattered throughout are “Duds of Emerald” (pieces of clothing):

*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 thrift  
And still the scene prevails  
Till Dusk obstructs the Diligence –  
Or Contemplation fails.  
(Fr 318)*

“Nature like Us is sometimes caught / Without her Diadem –” Dickinson once wrote, implying that beneath nature’s composed exterior lies a rapturous, unruly side—passionate, exuberant, playfully clumsy (Fr 1121). Dickinson seems to suggest in her diadem verse that it takes a special kind of vision to notice this wilder side of nature; only sometimes can views of it be “caught.” It takes a rigorously probing eye, and indeed, she may have considered her windows as special lenses that assisted her in visually catching nature’s elusive frenzied side.

Yet Dickinson’s windows may have been more than just inanimate objects whose design and texture influenced her poems’ formal structure and contents. When she peered through her windows, she came in touch with the glass artisans who made them, catching hazy glimpses into their world. In *Victorian Glassworlds*, the literary critic

Isobel Armstrong writes, “To look through glass in the mid-nineteenth century was most likely to look through and by means of the breath of an unknown artisan. The congealed residues of somebody else’s breath remained in the window, decanter, and wineglass, traces of the workman’s body in the common bottle, annealed in the substance he worked.”<sup>11</sup> The warps and striations in nineteenth-century glass objects were the “spectral undulations” of bodily labor. In her diary, the English poet Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) — Dickinson’s exact contemporary — reflected on such spectral undulations. Rossetti noted that glass vessels seemed to have “caught” within their forms the vestiges of some living spirit: “The point of beauty which astonished me was that one or more of the specimens had caught, as it were, a momentary grace. . . . Such a contour, a curve, an attitude if I may so call it, did here or there one of these old glasses exhibit . . . as flexibility itself or motion might show forth if these could be embodied and arrested. Inert glass moulded from within caught the semblance of such an alien grace.”<sup>12</sup> Rossetti’s term “alien grace” alludes to the subtle traces of the glassblowers’ breath and bodies captured in the curves and contours of the glass vessels. When molten glass hardens, transforming from liquid into solid, it preserves in its form the particular character and force of the glassmaker’s breath, the precise twist and arc of his body, as he gave the molten glass its essential shape. Thus fossilized in the finished glass artifact is the breathing, moving body of the glassmaker during the height of his performative virtuosity. In the glass object, the maker’s flexibility in motion is paradoxically “embodied and arrested,” as Rossetti phrased it. Nineteenth-century glass is therefore a rare historical artifact in that it actually manages to crystallize in its translucent body the living pulse of the past. When one breathed on window glass, Armstrong writes, one “awakened the dormant breath” of the maker, reanimating the atmospheric conditions and human actions that gave it form.<sup>13</sup>

Crown and cylinder glass, the kinds of glass predominately used for domestic windows in the nineteenth century, especially exhibits the glassmakers’ ghostly traces. Sheets of window glass were rarely ever uniform in thickness because the numerous contingencies of glassblowing did not ensure it. Each glass pane in a sash window may have originated from a different batch of molten glass, each pane may have been the work of a different glassmaker, and each glassmaker released his breath at a singular and unique moment in time. These subtle variations among the glass panes could cause the completed window’s framed view to appear more like a glinting, shifting mosaic than a stable, unified picture. A window can be considered a collection of time capsules —

each pane an artifact documenting a very particular set of human actions at a very particular moment in time.<sup>14</sup>

The subtle waves, whorls, and bubbles Dickinson saw in her windowpanes were thus indexical markers of the bodies of the nineteenth-century glassworkers who made her glass. Several glasshouses produced window glass in Massachusetts when the Dickinson residence was built in 1813 and later renovated in 1855; among them were the Chelmsford Glass Company near Boston, the Franklin Glass Factory in Warwick, and the Berkshire Window Glasshouses in western Massachusetts.<sup>15</sup> Any of these glassworks could have manufactured the window glass that became a part of the Dickinson Homestead. When Dickinson breathed on her windowpanes, she disturbed the air frozen within them, temporarily reviving the spirits of these New England artisans and their working environment.

Dickinson would have become familiar with the world of glass-making through her voracious reading of contemporary newspapers and periodicals. The February 1851 issue of *Harper's New Monthly*, a periodical to which the Dickinson household subscribed and which Dickinson herself read assiduously, includes an article entitled "The History and Mystery of the Glass-House." It offers a technical, historical, and philosophical treatise on glass and includes an extensive description of glassworkers in their factory environment: "We will now step into the glass-house itself, where the practical work of converting sand into goblets, vases, mirrors, and window-panes is going forward with a celerity and accuracy of hand and head that can not fail to excite wonder and admiration. . . . Look round this extensive area, where you see numbers of men in their shirt-sleeves, with aprons before them, and various implements in their hands, which they exercise with extraordinary rapidity, and you will soon understand how the glittering wonders of glass are produced."<sup>16</sup>

Throughout her lifetime, Dickinson seemed drawn to reading about fiery, labor-intensive work sites, perhaps because such places appeared so foreign to her. She once asked her sister-in-law to lend her an issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* so that she could read Rebecca Harding Davis's anonymously published short story "Life in the Iron-Mills," a tale that takes place in a Vulcan-like iron factory with "pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams . . . wide caldrons filled with boiling fire."<sup>17</sup> "Vesuvius at Home," Dickinson once wrote in a poem, imagining a volcanic atmosphere in the midst of the Homestead's domestic comfort (Fr 1691). The vivid details in the *Harper's* glass article would have



appealed to this aspect of Dickinson's sensibility: the powerful heat of the glasshouse furnaces, the physical prowess and choreographic grace of the glassworkers, the transformation of earthy substances such as sand and ash into refined objects. The glassmakers, "these Vulcans of the glass-furnace," performed "art magic," the article describes. With "dextrous hands and practiced eyes," they exerted "a command over the red-hot glass." Blowing and twirling the fiery liquid, conflating and contracting the mass, conducting "mysterious evolutions" with their instruments, these "artificers" transformed the unwieldy fluid into "articles of the most exquisite form and delicacy."<sup>18</sup> Another glass article in *Harper's* describes the glassmakers as "creatures of the blow-pipe" who, although "limited by the power of a single pair of lungs," could achieve magical feats. "By a wave of the wand," the article states, the glassmakers could transform globes of molten glass into both the necessities and luxuries of life: "Dishes for our table, vases for our flowers; eyes which we peer into immensity and read the secrets of other worlds, or search the invisible creation and read the secrets of our own; mirrors which vainly strive to teach us to 'see ourselves as others see us;' and windows which flood our houses with warmth and light, and exclude the rain and wind vainly striving to follow—these are among the products of the necromantic art which we call glass-making."<sup>19</sup>

These glasshouse articles in *Harper's* and other widely read periodicals appeared during an era of what Armstrong calls "glass consciousness," a period spanning the middle decades of the nineteenth century when a combination of factors—the increase of glass production, the falling prices of glass, and the emergence of new methods of glass manufacture—made glass the miracle material of the century, drawing the attention of not only manufacturers and industrialists but also the general public. Numerous British and American newspapers and periodicals featured essays about the world of glass, translating knowledge about the properties of glass, the processes of glassmaking, and the practical and decorative uses of glass to a broad readership.<sup>20</sup> American and British glass manufacturers such as Apsley Pellatt and Deming Jarves published popular memoirs and treatises on glassmaking, tying their personal biographies with historical and contemporary accounts of glass techniques and discoveries.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the monument that best epitomizes the era's glass consciousness is the Crystal Palace. Situated in London's Hyde Park, this 1,851-foot-long, 128-foot-high, glass-and-iron building designed by Joseph Paxton (1803–1865) was constructed to house the Great

Exhibition of 1851, the first of the international world's fairs showcasing manufactured goods from around the world. Not only the glass objects showcased within the Crystal Palace but also the glass panes that constituted the building were a spectacle, a grand materialization of the period's exploration of the possibilities of glass in art, industry, and society. It looked like a glass conservatory writ large — not a surprising effect considering that Paxton was a noted horticulturalist and designer of conservatories in addition to architect. In the pages of *Punch*, the British playwright Douglas Jerrold (1803–1857) described the Great Exhibition's building as a “palace made of windows,” and indeed, in its most essential form the Crystal Palace was a cast-iron skeleton framing 300,000 large windowpanes. Chance Brothers and Company, an English glass manufactory near Birmingham, produced the 956,000 square feet of glass panes that went into the construction of the Crystal Palace.<sup>22</sup>

Dickinson was twenty years old when the Great Exhibition took place. She did not visit the exposition — the farthest city she ever traveled to was Washington, DC. But through her reading, Dickinson became familiar with the international fair and the remarkable building that housed it. From early 1851 to late 1852, *Harper's* reported on the proceedings of the Great Exhibition. The April 1851 issue of *Harper's*, in particular, includes a lengthy, detailed feature about the inception, design, and construction of the Crystal Palace.<sup>23</sup> The periodical thereafter regularly referenced the fair — reporting, even, on the fate of the Crystal Palace after the exhibition had ended.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary novels Dickinson read also addressed the Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace, although often in thinly veiled form. In *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), for example, the protagonist Lucy Snowe wanders into the midst of an urban park festival reminiscent of the exhibition in its diversity of sights and sounds from around the world: “In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous, a plain sprinkled with coloured meteors, a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire gemming the foliage; a region, not of trees and shadow, but of strangest architectural wealth — of altar and of temple, of pyramid, obelisk, and sphinx; incredible to say, the wonders and the symbols of Egypt teemed throughout the park.”<sup>25</sup> Brontë had visited the Great Exhibition five times in 1851; it makes sense that she projected her fresh impressions of the Crystal Palace onto *Villette*, a novel that was published just two years after her visits to the fair. More than just a transposition of the author's experiences at the exhibition, *Villette* is a literary work that exemplifies the

period's widespread glass consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Brontë infuses *Villette's* rooms, buildings, courtyards, and streets with glass: windows, mirrors, casements, panes, lattices, and glass walls and doors punctuate the narrative so profusely, playing such key roles in the development of plot, that if the novel were a work of architecture, it would be a glittering Crystal Palace.

Dickinson was therefore immersed in her period's glass consciousness through her reading. But her domestic life enabled her to participate firsthand as well in this glass culture. The Homestead was furnished with mirrors, glass tableware, glass doorknobs, and, perhaps most important to Dickinson's creative process, the glass fonts and shades of oil lamps, whose circumference of light illuminated the poet's desk during her nighttime writing sessions.<sup>27</sup> These glass objects would have animated the rooms and hallways of the Homestead with brilliant reflections and refracted light. At the Amherst commencement parties that Dickinson's father hosted at the Homestead, it was Dickinson's duty to stand near the dining room's east window and hand out small glasses of sherry to guests, pouring the wine from a large glass decanter.<sup>28</sup> We can imagine Dickinson holding the heavy crystal decanter in one hand, paying close attention to the tiny drinking vessels as she carefully filled their hollow interiors with sherry. She must have noticed the beauty of the glass facets glinting in the sunlight or candlelight. Dickinson also had the luxury of having, all to herself, her own miniature Crystal Palace. The windowed conservatory her father had built for her at the southeast corner of the Homestead was constructed almost entirely of glass. Filled with ferns, wildflowers, and exotic plants, Dickinson's conservatory may have seemed to her as colorful and varied as the showcases at the Great Exhibition.<sup>29</sup>

All these glass objects helped constitute Dickinson's personal experience of her period's glass culture; they aided in constructing her own private glass world. But the windows in particular did something more: facing outward toward the world, they gave her a sense of being connected to other lives and places, setting the activities of the Homestead and her inner life on a wider stage. In fact, Dickinson might have called her encounter with the glassmakers via her window glass an "atmospheric acquaintance," a term she used to describe her social meetings with actual people. She once sent a written greeting to a pair of newly made friends that read, "The atmospheric acquaintance so recently and delightfully made, is not, I trust, ephemeral, but absolute as Ether."<sup>30</sup> The phrase implies a light kind of greeting—an atmospheric touching—in which each party gently hovers in the other's



space. The intermingling of Dickinson's and the glassmakers' breath on her windowpanes ties the poet and the glass artisans together in a way that is delicately physical, even *metaphysical*: bringing together aspects of their bodily lives and their immediate environments in a way as delicate and fleeting as the air they breathed. This overlapping of breath is a trans-situational touching that crosses time, space, and social circumstance to meet on an otherwise impossible plane of existence—the window glass itself.

Perhaps the intimacy implied between Dickinson and the glassworkers in her act of breathing on glass was a closeness that grew not out of her concern about the socioeconomic realities of the glassmakers' lives but out of her elusive, imagined sense of a creative kinship with them. The glassmakers, through their incidental creation of the warps and waves on the glass, shaped not only the landscapes she saw through her windows but even—let us consider the possibility—her landscape *poems* as well, making these poems creative collaborations. Dickinson may have likewise considered the Homestead windows the glassmakers' "poems." Into the slot of each glass pane a glassblower released his "inspiration," with the word "inspiration" meaning both the movement of his breath and the masterful verve and controlled abandon with which he transformed the lumps of molten glass into solid creations. The glass artisans may not have written poems of their own, but they inscribed their mortal lives in glass through intensive acts of "inspiration." The nearness of the windows to Dickinson and her writing desk perhaps infused the glass panes and the glassmakers' work with the atmosphere of poetry.

Nineteenth-century glassmakers did, in fact, closely identify their mortal bodies with the inanimate glass objects they made. Blown glass lends itself to anthropomorphism because of the level of intimacy required of the human body in the production of a glass artifact. In the transference of air from the lungs of the glassblower to the interior hollow of a glob of liquid glass, there seems to be a transferring of life. The glass expert Barbara Morris has quoted a glassmaker as once saying, "You can see the men in the glass," meaning figuratively that one can identify a glassmaker's individual style by closely attending to the glass object's details, but implying more literally that one can find actual traces of the glass artisans' breath and body motions in the glass.<sup>31</sup> European manufacturers sometimes called their glass artisans *souffleurs*, "blowers," a term that immediately conjures up the centrality of breath and body in the production of glass artifacts.<sup>32</sup>

The glassmakers' own sense of their glass artifacts as expressive of their bodily vitality and artisanal mastery is especially palpable in "friggers" or "whimsies," novelty glass items that glassblowers made during their off-hours with leftover molten glass (fig. 5). These objects were frequently free-blown and display degrees of fluidity and wit that bespeak their makers' creative exuberance and ease. Though these objects were sometimes sold for profit, their common presence in the homes of glassmakers suggests that they were more a point of personal pride, that the makers did indeed consider these items as manifestations of their creative verve and bodily dexterity.<sup>33</sup>

In a few known instances, nineteenth-century glassmakers voiced in verse their consciousness of the metaphor of their bodies and spirit as melded to the glass objects they made. On the 1814 tombstone of John Joseph Stickelmire, a German immigrant glassblower and foreman at the Chelmsford Glass Manufactory, are inscribed these verses:

*This verse reminds the heedless as they pass  
That life's a fragile drop of unnealed glass  
The slightest wound ensures a fatal burst  
And the frail fabric shivers into dust.  
So he whom in his art could none surpass  
Is now himself reduced to broken glass.  
But from the grave, and fining pot of man  
From scander and glass galls pursed again  
New mixed and fashioned by almighty power  
Shall rise a firmer fabric than before.<sup>34</sup>*

Stickelmire's epitaph allegorizes the life and body of a glass artisan as a delicate sheet of glass; the slightest injury would cause it to burst. But God as divine glassmaker uses the tools of the craft to refashion the broken shards of the glassmaker's body into a stronger, sturdier sheet. For the glassmaker, then, spiritual resurrection is not immaterial but closely linked to the glass articles he made.

Did Dickinson view the relation between her body and her craft in a similar way—her mortal life as fused to the poems she wrote? These verses she composed in 1865 suggest that she did:

*Ashes denote that Fire was -  
Revere the Grayest Pile  
For the Departed Creature's sake  
That hovered there awhile -*

5

Covered sugar bowl and cream jug, ca. 1835–1850. Covered sugar bowl: glass,  $10\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{5}{16}$  in. (27.2 × 13.4 cm). Cream jug: glass,  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$  in. (16.4 × 11.4 cm). Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, 55.4.157 and 55.4.131.



*Fire exists the first in light  
And then consolidates  
Only the Chemist can disclose  
Into what Carbonates -  
(Fr 1097)*

Vendler interprets this poem as Dickinson’s own meditation on poetry: the poet considered her compositions as the ashes of once-living, vivid experiences and observations, “the cryptic residue of her incandescent emotional and intellectual fires.” This particular poem, Vendler suggests, is about “an intense reduction of life to the embers of verse” — the transformation of lively rapture into reduced artifact. The poet asks the reader to revere the gray pile of ashes (the seemingly



dry and lifeless verses) for the sake of the creature (the poet) that once hovered over it. As a chemist must study the ashes to discover the living thing that was once there, so the reader of Dickinson's poems must spend time with her verses to try to make his or her way back to the original, intense experience the words point to.<sup>35</sup>

Dickinson's closeness to her window glass may have thus been a form of empathy with the glassmakers' creative fate, a kindred mourning for the inevitable transmutation of one's large and powerful conflagrations into diminutive, compact forms. But it may have been precisely this striking contrast between the small, refined finished artifact and the hefty, dynamic activity that went into creating it that, for Dickinson, gave the craft of poetry its majesty and drama. Poems and the creative process that brings them into being are like diagrams of rapture — neat, enclosed structures housing a past of extraordinarily rigorous activity. Dickinson often saw her poems as tiny, unassuming objects (if not always as lowly as a pile of lifeless ashes) that required and subsequently contained great potential power: "This is a Blossom of the Brain - / A small - italic Seed" (Fr 1112); "We play at Paste - / Till qualified for Pearl -" (Fr 282); "The Spider holds a Silver Ball / In unperceived Hands - / And dancing softly to Himself / His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds -" (Fr 513). Glassmaking's transformation of raw earthy substances, by means of mighty fires, into refined, delicate objects may have offered Dickinson a vocabulary of extremes with which to convey her view of poetry as the passionate burning up of experience into ashes; it is a vocabulary of heat and flame, of light and incandescence, of dramatic transmutations between raw materiality and transcendent experience: "Dare you see a Soul at the 'White Heat'?" (Fr 401); "The Zeros taught Us - Phosphorus - / We learned to like the Fire," (Fr 284); "The Poets light but Lamps - / Themselves - go out -" (Fr 930). Dickinson's attachment to the glassmakers might have been based on her sense of their identity as artisans who similarly wrestled with heat and fire, who exhibited rapture and virtuosity in their craft, whose bodies were burned up in the production of small, elegant objects.

In a letter to her literary mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862, Dickinson asked, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"<sup>36</sup> Modeling her poems after her breath-filled windows may have been one strategy Dickinson imagined would keep her verses "alive." We can picture the poet leaning over her sheets or fragments of paper as she composed her poems, the paper quivering beneath her face as she breathed, her breath animating the words and feelings as they traveled from her mind and body to the compositions. The poems

would have thus absorbed her “inspiration” — the movement of her breath and the precise thing or condition that stimulated her mind and emotions to a level conducive to the act of creation — just as the glass panes absorbed and fixed the glassmakers’ breath and body movements in their translucent forms. Dickinson may not have blown or twirled glass sheets into being, but her poems were her self-made windows: vapors of her living spirit dwell in the words, spaces, and punctuations of her small compositions just as vestiges of the glassblowers’ breath and physical vitality linger in the panes of the Homestead windows.

If Dickinson’s relationship with her windows temporarily awakened the glassmakers’ dormant spirits, can our present-day engagement with the poet’s windows revive hers? Can we make an “atmospheric acquaintance” with her, as she did with the glass artisans, through these artifacts? It would depend on the intensity of our desire, the quality of our imagination, and the capacity of our belief. Dickinson displayed all these qualities in her interactions with her windows. Trying to connect with distant friends, she pressed her palms against the window glass and imagined herself a bird. Leaning close to the panes, she observed an insect dancing on the glass. Attempting to cultivate an atmosphere of spring in her wintry room, she festooned her windows with flowers and plants. Using the windows as magic lenses, she caught glimpses of the glassmakers’ souls as well as the hidden, wilder soul of Amherst. To someone with less earnestness and wit, less whimsy and audacious belief, the windows might remain as inactive utilitarian objects. But to Dickinson, the windows were a source of creativity, a medium of communication, an instrument for gaining exhilarating new perspectives. Certainly the windows’ form and materiality enabled them to function in such a generative fashion, but Dickinson also met them halfway by offering up her own powers of observation and imagination.

Knowing this about Dickinson’s engagement with her windows, we should approach the artifacts of her life with a similar offering of playfulness and expectant possibility. For example, in his gallery installations produced in the 2000s and 2010s, the artist Spencer Finch (b. 1962) reproduces the natural lighting and atmosphere of the Homestead’s interior spaces and gardens, encouraging present-day audiences to imagine what it may have been like for Dickinson to live and move among the spaces of the house and grounds in her own time.<sup>37</sup> In her scholarship and writing on Dickinson’s relation to the working class, Aífe Murray imagines the soundscapes of the Homestead’s rooms and hallways, speculating how the foreign accents and

domestic activities of Dickinson's servants may have influenced Dickinson's poetic language and cadence.<sup>38</sup> George Boziwick's research on how the music Dickinson was exposed to may have influenced the formation of her poetic voice allows us to imagine the Homestead echoing with the tinkling notes of marches, waltzes, and quicksteps.<sup>39</sup> These projects animate the artifacts (what I call "the art of facts") by imaginatively suffusing them with the enlivening forces of weather and sound, of chatter and atmosphere. They invite the fluid elements of life to enter the hardened objects, producing a semblance of their original ephemeral contexts. They bring to the dead artifacts a sense of the temporal flow and inevitable contingencies of life—the fleeting, ever-changing, often natural forces that circulate amor-phously in the environment. If the living pulse of the past cannot be preserved along with the artifact, then perhaps that pulse can be evoked with the inspired help of the living, breathing forces of the imaginative historian.

- 1 See the Emily Dickinson Museum's *Historic Structure Report*, prepared by Myron O. Stachiw and Associates, in June 1999, especially the elevation illustrations of the Homestead circa 1855 (fig. 24).
- 2 Emily Dickinson to Mary Bowles [Mrs. Samuel Bowles], Dec. 10, 1859, reprinted in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:357.
- 3 Emily Dickinson to Mrs. Josiah Gilbert Holland [Elizabeth Holland], early 1884, reprinted in *Letters*, 3:811.
- 4 Emily Dickinson to Louise Norcross, late Apr. 1859, reprinted in *Letters*, 2:353.
- 5 Emily Dickinson to Mary Bowles [Mrs. Samuel Bowles], after Christmas 1859, reprinted in *Letters*, 2:359.
- 6 Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, Oct. 17, 1851, reprinted in *Letters*, 1:148.
- 7 Dickinson poems in this essay are quoted from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 8 Ange Mlinko specifically likens Dickinson's envelope writings to windows in her article "Infamy or Urn" in *The Nation* (Jan. 7, 2014). For more on Dickinson's envelope writings, see *The Gorgeous Nothings*, ed. Marta Werner and Jen Bervin (New York: Christine Burgin/New Directions, in association with Granary Books, 2013).
- 9 In Martha Dickinson Bianchi's memoirs of her aunt, Bianchi mentions that Dickinson's writing table stood by the south window in the bedroom, and that this spot became a kind of "lookout" from which to "observe the earth beneath." See Martha Dickinson Bianchi, *Emily Dickinson Face to Face* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1932), 10–11.
- 10 Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 10–11.
- 11 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4–5. Armstrong's book offers an excellent account and discussion of the concept of nineteenth-century glass culture; my understanding of this period's preoccupation with glass owes much to Armstrong's seminal research and thinking.
- 12 Christina Georgina Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885; Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1886), 164–65.
- 13 Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 5.
- 14 For technical descriptions of nineteenth-century windows, glass, and glassmaking, see Susan Swiatosz, "A Technical History of Late Nineteenth Century Windows in the United States," *Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology* 17, 1 (1985): 31–37; Dessame Lorrain, "An Archaeologist's Guide to Nineteenth Century American Glass," *Historical Archaeology*, 1968, 35–44; Dwight Lanmon, *The Golden Age of English Glass, 1650–1775* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 2011), 251–52; Arlene Palmer, *Glass in Early America* (Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1993), 386; and Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 39–42. For the variety of marks and waves found in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century window glass, see William Munro, *Window Glass in the Making* (Pittsburgh, PA: American Window Glass Company, 1926), 58–66.
- 15 Kenneth M. Wilson, *New England Glass and Glassmaking* (New York: Crowell, 1972), 57–66.
- 16 "The History and Mystery of the Glass-House," *Harper's New Monthly*, Feb. 1851, 312.
- 17 Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Apr. 1861, reprinted in *Letters*, 2:372–73; Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills," in *Atlantic Monthly* 7, 42 (Apr. 1861): 433 (quotations).
- 18 "History and Mystery of the Glass-House," 312–13.
- 19 Lyman Abbott, "Glass-Blowing as a Fine Art," *Harper's New Monthly*, Feb. 1871, 347, 337.
- 20 For an overview of the concept of glass culture, see Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 1–16.
- 21 Apsley Pellatt, *Curiosities of Glass Making* (London: David Bogue, 1849); Deming Jarves, *Reminiscences of Glass-Making* (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1854).



- 22 Jeffrey Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 41–53; C. H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Commemorative Album* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, in association with Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1950); Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 141–54.
- 23 “Crystal Palace,” *Harper's New Monthly*, Apr. 1851, 584–88.
- 24 See, for example, “Monthly Record of Current Events,” *Harper's New Monthly*, Oct. 1852, 697.
- 25 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 403.
- 26 For Brontë and the Great Exhibition, see Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 239–45.
- 27 Between 1840 and 1855, the Dickinson family lived not in the Main Street Homestead, where the poet resided from the time she was born until the age of ten, but in a house on Pleasant Street, where she dwelled between the ages of ten and twenty-four. The Great Exhibition of 1851 took place while the Dickinsons were living in the Pleasant Street house, but the glass consciousness the Great Exhibition cultivated and epitomized would have carried over into the following decades, influencing the poet's experience of glass culture even as she and her family returned to live in the Main Street Homestead. For discussions of the family's move between the two houses, see Jean McClure Mudge, *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), chs. 2–3 (pp. 25–115); Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26–38; and Millicent Todd Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* (1955; New York: Dover, 1967), 61–65.
- 28 Bianchi, *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*, 7–8.
- 29 For more on Dickinson's conservatory, see Mudge, *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home*, 145–72; and Judith Farr and Louise Carter, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 139–74.
- 30 Emily Dickinson to Mr. and Mrs. E. J. Loomis, Nov. 19, 1884, reprinted in *Letters*, 3:851–52.
- 31 Glassmaker, quoted in Barbara Morris, *Victorian Table Glass and Ornaments* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1978), 79; Barbara Morris is in turn quoted in Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 226.
- 32 Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 90.
- 33 For more on friggers and whimsies, see Charles R. Hajdamach, *British Glass 1800–1914* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, Eng.: Antique Collectors' Club, 1991), 379–81. See also Frederick Barkey's interview with Omar Lambiotte in Frederick Barkey, *Cinder Heads in the Hills: The Belgian Window Glass Workers of West Virginia* (Charleston: Humanities Foundation of West Virginia, 1988), 35.
- 34 John Joseph Stickelmire epitaph, quoted in Arlene Palmer Schwind, “The Glassmakers of Early America,” in *The Craftsman in Early America*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 189. These verses are also reprinted, along with several other tombstone epitaphs from the Forefathers' Burying Ground in Chelmsford Center, in Wilson Waters, *The History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts* (Lowell, MA: Courier-Citizen Company, 1917), 718. For more on the Chelmsford Glass Manufactory, see Waters, *History of Chelmsford*, 484, 658.
- 35 For these quotations and Vendler's interpretation of this poem, see Vendler, *Dickinson*, 400–403.
- 36 Emily Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Apr. 15, 1862, reprinted in *Letters*, 2:403.
- 37 For more on Spencer Finch's Emily Dickinson installations, see Gillian Serisier, “Profile: Spencer Finch,” *Artist Profile*, Aug. 2009, 51–53; Lynne Seear and Nicholas Chambers, *Spencer Finch: As If the Sea Should Part and Show a Further Sea* (Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 2009), 18–22; and Susan Cross, “Susan Cross Talks to Spencer Finch,” *NY Arts Magazine*, Nov.–Dec. 2007.
- 38 See Aife Murray, *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Dickinson's Life and Language* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2009).
- 39 George Boziwick, “‘My Business is to Sing’: Emily Dickinson's Musical Borrowings,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8, 2 (May 2014): 130–66.

