Reading the Fascicles of Emily Dickinson

Dwelling in Possibilities

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CHAPTER 4

"Alabaster Chambers": Two Versions of Dwellings of the Dead

Fascicle 6
c.1859

F	J	Fr	
1	73	136	Who never lost
2	74	137	A Lady red—amid
3	126	138	To fight aloud, is
4	127	139	'Houses'—so the Wise
5	128	140	Bring me the sunset
6	75	141	She died at play
7	129	142	Cocoon above!
8	76	143	Exultation is the going
9	77	144	I never hear the word
10	130	122	These are the days
11	131	123	Besides the Autumn poets
**12	216	124	Safe in their Alabaster
13	78	125	A poor—torn heart
14	132	126	I bring an unaccustomed
15	133	127	As Children bid the guest
16	79	128	Going to Heaven!
17	80	129	Our lives are Swiss

Fascicle 10
c.1860–61

F	J	Fr	
1	230	244	We—Bee and I—live
2	231	245	God permits industrious
3	232	245	The *Sun—just touched*
4	233	247	The Lamp burns sure—
5	163	131	Tho' my destiny be Faustian—
6	207	199	Tho' I get home how late
7	208	200	The rose did caper
8	209	201	With thee, in the Desert—
*9	185	202	Faith is a fine invention
10	210	203	The thought beneath
11	318	204	I'll tell you how
12	159	135	A little bread—a crust
13	160	132	Just lost, when I was saved!
14	211	205	Come slowly—Eden
15	212	206	Least Rivers—docile
16	270	248	*One Life* of so much consequence
17	234	249	You're right—the way
**18	216	124	Safe in their Alabaster
19	235	250	The Court is far away—
20	236	251	If *He dissolve*—then—
21	237	252	I think just how my shape
22	224	25	I've nothing else—to bring

"*Has girl read Republican?*" asked Susan Dickinson across the hedge from the Dickinson homestead on March 1, 1862 (Leyda 1960, 48), referring to the appearance of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (J216, Fr124). Dickinson did not need to read Bowles's journal for validation of her claims to being a poet. She had printed—at least twice—this particular poem in two different versions. Identical but for one significant verb in their first verses, the poems are syntactically nearly identical also in their second verses, but in diction and connotation they differ radically. They differ even more because of the context in which each appears. The "repetition" of this poem, so important to Dickinson scholars, affords a laboratory for the claims I have made in the first three chapters: that one proof of Dickinson's intentionality in compiling her fascicles is in reading those poems contextually. Reading contextually is particularly instructive when one discovers two different settings for a poem, whether that poem is nearly identical as in "At last," the poem that centered Fascicles 8 and 21, or significantly altered as in "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (J216, Fr124), a poem that Sue herself might have forwarded to editor Bowles. The revisions and variants of "Safe" are one more proof of Dickinson's diligence.

Although it may have been "given to [her] by / the Gods—" (J454, Fr455), as Dickinson claimed in Fascicle 21's final poem, poetic power needed just that: diligence, human work. Dickinson pictures herself in Fascicle 5 as "Low at my problem bending" (J69, Fr99), and she describes "Artists" who "wrestled here!" (J110, Fr111). Reflecting her Puritan heritage's work ethic, she says "Luck is not chance— / It's Toil— / Fortune's expensive smile / Is earned—" (J1350, Fr1360). Surrounding notions of diligence in metaphors, she speaks of miners, birds, and bees. The patient weaving of spiders, she says, is "Superiority to Fate." The result of such labor "Is difficult to gain / 'Tis not conferred of Any / But possible to earn / a Pittance at a time" (J1081, Fr1043). That she bent low over the problems of individual poems is clear from calligraphic designs and the inclusion of variants, which increase as the years progress, and from the many statements she made or implied on the power of the poet to escape the closed-in "still" space of prose. That she was just as deliberative in fashioning her books is equally clear.

No poem, in fact, provides more ample proof of the conscious artistry that structures Dickinson's surprises, of the pressures imposed by and the support given by her literary community, or of the value of reading poems in their fascicle contexts than "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (J216, Fr124). The story of its complex publishing history is well documented: that the poem was the subject of notes to Sue with the result that Dickinson changed its second stanza not once but twice,[1] that it was one of the first four poems the poet sent to Higginson, that it was one of the twelve poems published in her own lifetime, and that the poet found two of its versions suitable for inclusion in

her own private printing enterprise, the fascicles.[2] However, aside from Martha Nell Smith's extensive discussion of these multiple versions as proof of "Dickinson's delight in different ways of seeing, in perspective's power over meaning and comprehension" (1985, 138), few studies have noted how the poem's changes from the 1859 fascicle, in which the poet first placed it, to the new, more intricately patterned form the poet gave it in its 1860 setting were affected by surrounding poems. Even Franklin's comment in the long entry in his variorum (159–64) is consistent with his comment in the *Manuscript Books* that Dickinson's repetitions result from memory lapses: "The nature of the variants," he says, "suggests the text to have been recalled, unreliably, from memory" (1981, 163).

Before noting the radically different tone, image clusters, and narrative thrust of those surrounding poems, listen to the wild differences between the two poems, a difference that one picks up even in Dickinson's manipulation of sound effects (all of the hard, high-pitched e's of the first, the rolling r's and hissing s's of the second.

In the two years between the binding of Fascicle 6 and that of Fascicle 10 much apparently happened to shift the look and the tone of the two versions. The first is the one that, two years after she bound it in Fascicle 6, prompted the note from Sue with which this chapter begins. That version had just appeared in the *Springfield Daily Republican,* framed by the benign title "The Sleeping" on the top and "Pelham Hill, June, 1861" on the bottom. Although the punctuation and capitalization had been "regularized" and some lines had been indented in a way they are not in the fascicle, the words and lineation of the poem are identical to that in the fascicle Franklin dates in 1859. Johnson surmises that Dickinson may have enclosed a note when she sent Bowles the poem (1960, 154), but apparently no note survives. It seems unlikely that Sue, also a good friend of Bowles, sent the note, considering the fact that this is the version Sue "evidently" (Johnson's word) challenged Emily to improve, evidence of which may be the penciled revision of the poem (the "A" version of the poem in Fascicle 10) to which Emily appended the note, "Perhaps this verse would please you better—Sue—
Emily—"

Johnson, who quotes the note that followed from Sue—tantalizing evidence of Sue's talents as editor—says that "Evidently ED, having received Sue's 'Pony Express' [a phrase Martha Nell Smith discusses at some length], again attempted a second stanza" (ibid., 152), Johnson calls the two that appear earlier in this chapter as variants B and C "variant trial substitutes." I'm not so sure they are trial substitutes. All of the versions fit in diction and tone the pitch of Fascicle 10, just as the longer lines, lighter diction, and calligraphic design fit the surrounding poems in Fascicle 6.

Fascicle 6: A Setting for Gleeful Children

Johnson's conclusion that "It is unlikely that ED ever completed this poem in a version that entirely satisfied her" (1960, 152) may not be entirely correct. For the purposes of the two collections in which she copied the two (or shall we say four?) versions, each version seems if not, for Dickinson, "entirely" satisfactory—what would have been?—certainly appropriate to her varying purposes. Consider the first version with its laughing breeze, babbling Bee (tormenting the stolid Ear), and piping birds (in ignorant cadence—little songsters who defy the rules of prosody?). In Fascicle 6 the figure who stamps the mood is clearly younger and lighter than that of many of Dickinson's fascicles, even those that have preceded this sixth. Although the fascicle begins and ends on an orphic note, between these more meditative bookends it celebrates the feistiness of a childlike persona who, as the diction of this central poem and others within the collection suggests, privileges gaiety, glee, and exultation over sobriety and somberness.

Fascicle 6's images point to a persona who prefers (or several personae who prefer) flight, risk, and freedom to gravity, safety, and rigid societal structures. Admittedly many poems and other fascicles (21, for example) reflect a similar dichotomy. Those who discount reading fascicles contextually based on the observation that one may toss up any group of poems and discover a pattern are correct to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the reader remembers that, after all, the books *are* Dickinson's, not random groupings, and that whatever she intended them to be in terms of "publications," she stamped each one with its own personality. For example, in Fascicle 6 Dickinson uses some form of "gay" or "gala" in the fifth, sixth, and seventh poems; she surrounds and defines "exultation" in the eighth; her persona assumes a "flying attitude" in the ninth; she watches birds and bees tease in the tenth and squirrels scamper in the eleventh; and she even sees the hedge as "nonchalant" in the second poem of the fascicle. The almost dizzy mood of this fascicle distinguishes it from most of the others.

One of Dickinson's habitual personae but rarely as constantly present as in this fascicle, the child, has an overt role in four of the poems (fourth, ninth, tenth, and fifteenth) and an implied presence in others. As the close of this chapter explores in greater detail, this is a female child, self-consciously female: ready for transformation, a butterfly waiting to emerge from a cocoon, interested in clothing, in playing, in striving for satisfaction. This is a child tugging at bars. Associated with the child persona are the repetitious presences of "houses" and of "home." Dickinson has woven almost all of these threads into the poems that she has placed in this book—and, for quite different reasons, also in Fascicle 10—"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers."

Fascicle 10: The Voice of the Dramatist

Compiled in 1860 or 1861, only two years after Fascicle 6, the alternate setting for "Safe," Fascicle 10, plays with quite different images: images of sight (the film on the eye, the microscope, blindness); with light (the sunrise, sun play, sunset, and the lamp that burns within); with darkness and deep places; with drunkenness and parchedness; and, as so often in Dickinson (but not in Fascicle 6), with royalty: Crowns, for example, become "diadems" from surrendering "doges" in the repeated "Alabaster Chambers" poem. Images link poem to poem, domino-like, each poem hinting of the next. Patterns such as those in Fascicles 6 and 10 (and the other books) are revealed not only as one observes the individual poems closely but also as one stands back and looks at the whole. Such scrutiny, the enterprise of this study, engages us in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's "retrospective patterning," in Martha Nell Smith's "participatory reading," and in Michael Riffaterre's discovery of "hypograms." According to Riffaterre, a hypogram is "that which appears in the shape of words imbedded in sentences whose organization reflects the presuppositions of the matrix's nuclear word" (1978, 5). A hypogram, which Riffaterre describes only in the context of French poetry but which William Doreski has applied to his study of Fascicle 27 (1986), is the unspoken center, the hub around which the text revolves. Few explanations are as helpful as Riffaterre's hypogram in describing the effect of image clustering in fascicles.

Whatever term one uses to describe reading it, what seems particularly true of the tenth fascicle, more than others in this study, is its sense of drama and discovery within which are subplots and provisional meditations. Dickinson's well-documented penchant for drama, her "habitual role taking" (1985, 183) has been considered primarily within the context of individual poems or clusters of poems outside of her own publication. This fascicle offers the drama of heightened emotion, radically conflicted thoughts and feelings, and flashes of character.

Without reducing the poems to literal autobiographical "letters to the world," one may reasonably posit that the higher pitch of this fascicle reflects the dramatic events surrounding Dickinson as she gathered the poems. The events around the annus mirabilis, detailed in biographical studies, are so extraordinary that I summarize them radically: Charles Wadsworth called; Kate Anthon came and went; Bowles published "May Wine" ("I taste a liquor never brewed" [J214, Fr207, F12])—twice. Baby Ned was born and took Sue's time, but not so much that the mistress of Evergreens could not challenge her sister-in-law to make "a peer" for the first verse of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers." Not least, if we are to believe a twice (many)-told tale, connected, possibly with any one of these people, "Emily met her fate" (Leyda 1960, 34), and, perhaps connected with whatever that event was, the poet wrote the first of her puzzling "Master Letters."

In the public sphere events were equally dramatic. For example, the train line progressed; a balloon went up in front of the mansion house; and Edward Dickinson accepted an endorsement to be the Republican candidate for Lieutenant Governor. And on November 9, 1860, Lincoln became president, proclaiming soon thereafter his call for seventy-five thousand men. A visitor to Northampton "found the air filled with the sounds of war and the rumors of war," and by May 1861 *The Republican* noted that four students of Amherst "who reside in slave states left . . . for home, and will probably enlist in the secession army." A few months later, possibly while Dickinson completed collecting and copying the poems for Fascicle 10, Mrs. Browning died, and Dickinson began elegizing the "Foreign Lady." Any one or any combination of a few of these events might account for the difference between the childlike tone of Fascicle 6 and the high drama of Fascicle 10, although to be fair, Dickinson was by nature dramatic (reread Higginson's exhausted account of his meeting with her).

Joking to the Norcross cousins about the gift of a stagey cape, Dickinson playfully hinted at her penchant for the drama she found in such private and public events: "Do you think I am going 'Upon the boards' that I wish so smart attire? Such are my designs though. . . . May I not secure Loo for drama and Fanny for comedy?" (L225). But Dickinson needed no cousinly assistance for drama and comedy; she reveals it throughout Fascicle 10. In the spirit of retroactive reading, I want to examine this fascicle's dramatic context for "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—" before turning back to the playful setting of the previous version in Fascicle 6.

The Dramatic Design of Fascicle 10

Strutting a transcendental exuberance, the persona of the tenth fascicle's first poem announces "We—Bee and I—live / by the quaffing—" (J230, Fr244). Every element of the slightly sarcastic poem contributes to its overtly lightheartedly dramatic mood. Lindberg-Seyersted, who particularly delights in the suggestiveness of the noun-compound (By-thyme) in the last line, says that the speaker "envisages the delirious fate of the two revelers" (1968, 111). The "delirious fate" is a phrase that binds this poem to the fascicle's last. Underlined words in this first poem ("*all Hock,*" "*Ale,*" and "*his*") convey excitement. The choppy lineation, quite different, by the way, in the manuscript from that in the Johnson or Franklin editions, enhances the off-balance tipsy mood of this first poem. The image of the drunkards at the "vat and vine" (an onomatopoeic bit of alliteration as in "the humming Coroner") sustains the mood as the persona answers the sober prohibitionists (preaching in Safe Alabaster Chambers?) in the second stanza's "Do we 'get drunk'? . . . Do we 'beat' our 'Wife'?"

Giddy as all this sounds, this near hedonism (and the sexual connotations of dying of nectar), the diction of "We—Bee and I" also suggests drama on a deeper level. The distinction in the poem's second and third lines—"'Tis'nt *all* Hock—with us— / Life has its *Ale*"— suggests two grades of intoxicants known to Dickinson from literature,[3] if not served up from the sideboard on Main Street. That which is rare and valued as distinguished from that which is common (hock/ale) fail in equal measure. In the face of that failure, "We chant—for cheer." The fascicle ends with the notion that when one has "nothing else—to bring," one just "keep[s] bringing These," a pronoun with no referent unless one steeped in Dickinson fills in "poems" or "chants." Such is the symmetry the fascicle reader comes to expect.

The word "chant," associated elsewhere in Dickinson's work with nature's sounds,[4] has liturgical uses as well, of course, enhanced in this fascicle's first poem's "Latest at the Vine— / Noon—our last Cup." Origin of the wine, the vine is a metaphor for Christ ("I am the vine"); noon is associated by Dickinson (as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has discussed at length [1986]) with an hour of transcendence; and the cup, as Dickinson implies in "Cup of Anguish brewed for the Nazarene" ("Proud of my broken heart" [J1736, Fr1760]), holds the sacred wine memorializing that death. In Dickinson's lexicon the "cup's" meaning is spelled out:

> 3. in a *scriptural sense* sufferings and afflictions: that which is to be received or endured. 'Oh my father, if it be possible, let this *cup* pass from me.' Matt 26.4; blessings 'Good received' . . . my *cup* runneth over.' Take the cup of salvation.'"

This tipsy poem thus also connotes a drama that reaches its pitch by the eighteenth poem, in which the Alabaster Chamber divides sharply the worlds of the spiritually living and the conforming dead-in-life. Even the "humming Coroner" plays on these two levels. Dickinson's lexicon tells us that the coroner is so named because his office "is concerned principally with the crown."

The "crown"—this word placed on the bottom of the page and on the same plane as the word "Coroner"—is what the speaker "plays" with in "God permits industrious Angels—" (J231, Fr245). In fact, appearing in the fascicle's twelfth and nineteenth poems ("A little Bread" [J159, Fr135] and "The Court is far away" [J235, Fr250]), the crown is a central image in Fascicle 10, especially in the diadems of the repeated poem. If the first poem's second stanza had been a rebuke of sorts to the "Alabaster Chambers'" stolid dead, untouched by the noon that is the moment of death in the first poem, this second poem continues that rebuke. Even angels may play, says the persona (continuing the balance in her tone, the poet's own play and industry), as she tells the story of her drama with an angel. This angel is no wrestler but rather a charmer who entices the speaker to forget the dreary schoolroom routine and,

in her private drama, play a queen. "How *dreary— / Marbles* / after playing *Crown!*" exclaims the speaker. Dickinson's opposition of "Play" with this select angel on the one hand and "*Marbles*" on the other suggests the opposition of the Alabaster setting of those safely dead in life, on the one hand, with the implied active life of those willing to risk, to subvert, to be powerful and alive.

Dickinson appears to have arranged other parallel pairings between the second ("Angel") poem and that repeated eighteenth ("Alabaster") poem. In both she not only dichotomizes between a stupefying "marble" existence and the light play with something like angels, but she does so in a similar narrative structure. The narrator begins from the stance of one who lives among the dead, entombed in a schoolroom ("Angel") or grave ("Alabaster"), senses the giddy action of another world "above them," but returns to the reality of the silence and stolidity of death.

On a more literal level about a sunset, "God permits" is followed by "The *Sun—just touched* the / Morning" (J232, Fr246), a sunrise poem that continues to play with the dichotomy between the alive "Happy thing" and the "*unannointed*" thing (sunset/poet) deprived of her "*Crown.*" In the opened book the line "After playing *Crown*" in the second ("Angel") poem is almost exactly opposite to "The Morning . . . / Felt feebly for Her Crown—" just as the lines about the "industrious Angels" who are allowed to play are opposite to the description of Morning as a "*supremer—*" / A *Raised—Etherial* thing" on "*Holiday.*" Reading across as well as down the pages of these books is part of the fun of "participatory reading."

Fascicle 6, as I discuss at the close of this chapter, features childlike joy set against sunset, death, and Swiss lives, along with the coolness of autumn and the chill of Alabaster Chambers; Fascicle 10, on the other hand, privileges images of warmth, fire, wicks, and sunlight, against which the dark icy stolidity of this version of the Alabaster Chambers is all the more stark. "The *Sun—just touched* the / Morning," in fact, tells just that story. The departure of sunset "leave[s] a *new necessity*! The *want* of *Diadems*!" Whether the "new necessity" is to desire the crown, the diadem, or whether it is *not* to have it (that there is a necessity to want—the economy of desire), the story is one of staggering loss. The speaker feels "feebly for her crown" but instead finds only "her *unannointed forehead.*" That is the end of the poem on that page, where "crown" meets "crown" in the opened book. But the poem has another line. Perhaps it was the simple expedient of running out of room that led Dickinson to place "Henceforth—Her only One!" on the next page. The "only one" is the unseen crown on the unanointed forehead (something to keep in mind for the "unshriven" heart on the fascicle's last page).

Before that, there is a more immediate bit of intertextuality: Visually and contextually the line that spills over from the previous poem becomes a title for the fascicle's fourth poem, "The Lamp burns sure—within—" (J233,

Fr247), in which the poet eschews the need for outside inspiration. Because the unanointed head, perhaps unsanctified (and subversive), is independent and self-isolated, "the busy / Wick / At her phosphoric toil" does not need the "serfs—[to] supply the oil." Throughout her work, using imagery of fire, heat, light, and oils, Dickinson constructs this web of metaphors for the process and effect of writing poetry; consider, for example, "The Poets light but / Lamps— / Themselves—go out—" (J883, Fr930, set 5). Poets, says the speaker of this later poem, are the source of light; they are their own suns, lighting others as "Each Age [becomes] a Lens / Disseminating their Circumference." They do not need either the sun (third poem) or the serfs (fourth). That the Slave in this poem, as the Sun King in the third, is faithless is nothing to the poet: "The Lamp burns golden—on— / Unconscious that the oil / is out— / And that the Slave is gone." The poet does not need but makes and supplies oil (as in "Essential oils—are wrung—" [J675, Fr772, F34] and elsewhere). Slave and serf, minor characters in this little drama, may seem exotically out of place in Amherst, but in this fascicle's depiction of crowned heads and doges, perhaps they are not. Moreover, they may serve as only somewhat hyperbolic representatives of women, even privileged nineteenth-century women in lawyers' homes. They may also represent those who must remain in Alabaster Chambers as "Tribes—of Eclipse—in Tents— / of Marble."

The stance of the independent, self-fueling, light-and-warmth-producing poet, free of serf and slave, is repeated in the poem that faces it, Fascicle 10's fifth poem, "Tho' my destiny be Fustian—" (J163, Fr131). As does the repeated "Alabaster Chambers," which was part of a conversation with Sue, this poem has a specific context other than the fascicle. Ruth Miller reads it as a possible riposte to Bowles for having published an overly sentimental poem, "The Portrait" (1968, 120–22). The line to the Hollands suggests still other meanings (Keller 1979, 200). Within Fascicle 10's context, however, the line contrasts the ordinary or fustian to "damask fine" and "a silver apron." The speaker, whose "destiny be Fustian" and who appears as a "little Gipsy being" (along with the addressee) will not be victim to the "Frosts" that lay "their punctual fingers" on the finer damask Rose. The fascicle is inching closer to the dichotomy between those who, in variant B of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," are the victim of the "Frosts unhook[ed]—in the Northern Zones," those unlike the sturdy, conformity-resistant poet with her unanointed forehead who will live as "Roses of a steadfast summer / In a steadfast land."

The first five poems of the fascicle have their own low-key drama; the cast includes the drunken bee, the playing angel, the disappointing sun, the scorned faithless serf and slave, and the proud if fustian poet, living her superior life from within. They are followed by two poems reflecting dramas verging on the melodramatic. In fact, they seem parodic of the "damask" story of popular taste so scorned by the speaker of the fifth poem.

"Tho' I get home how late— / how late" (J207, Fr199) posits a dramatic situation Dickinson readers readily recognize, a situation fraught with what Vivian Pollak calls "the psychodynamics of desire in which pleasure is enhanced by a prior context of frustration . . . by a previous experience of pain" (1984, 124). Specifically, it recreates the imagined notions of a person, one who sounds to me like a romantic egoist or a self-dramatic child, out too late and too far. The character thinks (with some pleasure?) of the surprise and relief of those who have stayed up without hope, waiting and waiting for "Decades of Agony" and "Centuries of Way," phrases that may make the fascicle reader think of "Grand go the Years" and the "Staples—of Ages" that "have / buckled there" in the "Alabaster" poem, touchstone for the book. Two phrases that Dickinson has isolated on their own lines—"How late" and "and dark" convey the speaker's dread as she wistfully thinks of those gathered with "long-cheated eyes" around the fireside. She imagines those eyes meeting hers, but she leaves the drama a cliffhanger.[5]

If the sixth poem is an imagined melodrama, the seventh, "The Rose did caper on her cheek—" (J208, Fr200), is a sweetly quaint and slightly comic tale. The speaker is, as William Shurr notes, a "voyeur" (1983, 66), peeking in on a courting ritual that ends with the blushing, nervous man and woman moving toward a relationship in which their "troubled little Clocks / Ticked softly into one." However self-contained this rather saccharine courtship tale might be (its clock imagery is similar to the wedding message Dickinson included in at least two letters—L805 and L902—which also appears as J1569, Fr1598), it also has contextual relationships within the fascicle. Not only does it face the other melodrama in the opened book, but it also sets up two of the poems on the next page (the back of this one). That next page, left on the open book, holds three separate poems: "With thee, in the Desert—" (J209, Fr201), "Faith is a fine invention" (J185, Fr202), and "The thought beneath so slight / a film—" (J210, Fr203), each of which may be discussed in relation to the melodrama of "The Rose did caper" of the preceding page. To take the last one first, that on the bottom of the page: It requires little imagination to link the rising and falling "boddice" of the woman, so nervous that "Her fingers fumbled at her work—" of the seventh poem's courtship poem, with the thin image of the "slight film" that barely hides the "surge" of "the Appenine" in the fascicle's tenth poem, a poem that, in Dickinson's manner of overlapping images, connects with later poems in the fascicle as well. Move up to the top of the page to the poem that immediately follows the little melodrama. The quatrain of the eighth poem, almost a sequel to "The Rose," might script one of the demure lovers from that sweet "caper" poem. If one of the lovers gained courage and speech, he or she might say,

With thee in the Desert—
With thee in the thirst—

> With thee in the Tamarind wood—
> Leopard breathes—at last! (J209, Fr201).

Whether a passionate declaration from lover to lover or a cry from a Ruth figure to a Naomi ("whither thou goest, I will go"), "With thee" builds the drama to a pitch that is checked by the skepticism of the next poem. It has a third function as well. One word encourages the reader to read the quatrain and the fascicle in which it is the eighth poem as the development of a self-directed, inwardly supported poet who claims the right to "tell" us how the sun rose—to control, in other words, the figure she depicted as a male teasing force in the third poem. Dickinson alludes to the power by which that happens in the strangeness of "Tamarind," a word she had chosen only once before, in the first poem of the sixth fascicle (the one containing the earlier version of "Alabaster Chambers").

Linked with the poetic principle through its use in Poe's "Sonnet to Science,"[6] "tamarind" suggests the opposite of the safe, stolid, sleeping meek. Poe rails at "Science! true daughter of Old Time," possessed of "peering eyes" and "prey[ing] . . . upon the poet's heart." Equating "Science" with a "Vulture whose wings are dull realities," Poe ends his sonnet:

> Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
> The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
> The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Dickinson's dreamy, potent quatrain seems to speak for the rich imaginative possibilities of poetry as opposed to science. But look at the ninth poem, which follows it on the page:

> Faith is a fine invention
> For Gentlemen who *see*—
> But *Microscopes* are prudent
> In an Emergency. (J185, Fr202)

From the woman whose letters often reflect doubt, the statement, which Robert Weisbuch calls "an all out attack on fatuous faith" (1972, 113), has a personal ring. It also has a context; "Faith is a fine invention" seems an answer to the passionate, imaginative quatrain that precedes it, and it anticipates "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," another assault on "fatuous faith" waiting four pages ahead. Dickinson includes this poem also in Fascicle 12, where it shares the page with "A transport one cannot contain" (J184, Fr203). There Dickinson intensifies the quatrain by enclosing "Faith" in quotation marks, and there (Fascicle 12) the quatrain seems one voice—not necessarily the

dominant voice—in an ongoing interior conversation. Here, in Fascicle 10, however, it has an amused, reflective tone continued in "The thought beneath so slight / a film" (J210, Fr203) on the bottom of the page. Along with that "boddice," which harks back three poems, the word "film" interests the attentive reader. Associated more with sight (that which Gentlemen can improve with microscopes), the subject of the previous poem, "film" is an odd covering for "thought," but the next poem, the eleventh in the series, "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" (J318, Fr204), makes even more use of synesthesia.

As the page on the left enacts a drama in three parts (holding "With thee," "Faith is," and "The thought beneath"), "I'll tell you" encloses its own dialogue, a dialogue Dickinson makes more obvious by doing something strange for her, placing a horizontal line between the two main sections of the poem. "I'll tell you" contrasts "tell[ing]," based on what one sees, against not "knowing" what one cannot see. "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," says the speaker, using fanciful bright images; then, after that odd slash-line mark, she continues, "But how he *set,* I know not." The speaker may not know, but she surmises in subdued tones: "There seemed," she says, "a purple stile," over which a submissive "flock" was led away by a "Dominie in Gray."

Even though almost every commentator on this often anthologized "I'll tell you" has put the poem in the context of its inclusion as one of the four poems enclosed in the first letter to Higginson (with this fascicle's version of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"), and even though it was praised by its first readers of the 1890 edition as "a dainty caprice" with "rhythmic delicacy" (Buckingham 1989, 113, 20), no one has yet noticed its neat fit in the context of this fascicle. The division between the two parts reenacts the kind of dialogue we can hear among the three poems (those three stunning quatrains) that precede and face it and also that in those "Alabaster Chambers," where by the end, "Midnight in Marble— / Refutes—the Suns—."

Having plunged "the flock" into darkness in the eleventh poem, Dickinson continues the drama, envisioning the speaker now like "Old Napoleon— / the night before the crown" and also as a character plunged not only into darkness but into some kind of debtor's prison, begging for "A little Bread— a / Crust—a / Crumb" (J159, Fr132). As elsewhere, Dickinson provides alternative readings of the poem in lineating it so that combinations of the words placed on separate lines, "Crumb / warm— / and sweet / more, / life!" form an imagistic cluster within the larger poem. Whether read thus or in its usual form, the poem adds to those meditations on the economics of desire that provide some of the drama of Fascicle 10. Dickinson's diction also suggests motifs from earlier in the fascicle, especially from the first "Bee and I" poem in the "demijohn" (a wicker-enclosed bottle holding from one to ten gallons) and even in "not *port*ly, mind." But it is the puzzlingly terse reference to "old Napoleon" who is "Conscious . . . the night before the Crown," who

illustrates the value of reading contextually. Until a better explanation of the source of Dickinson's historical image comes along, let us suppose that she is referring to the little dictator's decision not to be crowned by the pope but to crown himself.[7] Self-coronation is the work of the poet-persona in the fascicle's second poem, in which she is "playing crown," and by implication in the nineteenth, when she intercedes for a Sovereign.

She also uses the poem to introduce a new motif that meshes with that of the economics of desire. The first of four poems in the fascicle's second half use the image of the sea and/or sailor: "A little bread—a crust—a / Crumb" ends with "A *Sailor's* business is *the shore!* / A *Soldier's—balls!* Who asketh / more, / must seek the neighboring / life!" In the next, the fascicle's fifteenth poem, which faces "A little Bread," the persona is "Just lost, when I was saved!" (J160, Fr132)—perhaps from a sea disaster, a metaphor, like passing across the stile or crossing the shore, for death.

"Just lost" enacts the drama of the second chance, the near-death experience that only whets the appetite, evoked in the previous poem, "A little Bread," for the experience of ecstasy or of death. "Called Back," as this was titled when it appeared in the *Independent* (Johnson, *Poems* 117), offers an option to being enclosed in "Alabaster Chambers," as in the poem toward which this fascicle is moving. The synesthesia of seeing things "by Ear unheard, / Unscrutinized by Eye" takes the fascicle reader back to "The thought beneath so slight / a film"; the second stanza with its image of "the awful doors / Before the seal" takes us ahead to the duplicated "Alabaster Chambers," and the final stanza of this thirteenth poem with its "Slow tramp [of] Centuries, [while] the Cycles wheel" parallels those "years—in the Crescent above them—" around which "Worlds scoop their Arcs— / And Firmaments row."

That last stanza, however, spills to the verso of the sheet, where it serves as a kind of introduction to and hence a recontextualizing of one of Dickinson's most discussed, especially in erotic terms, poems of passion, "Come slowly—Eden!" (J211, Fr 205). Mabel Todd, who had access, after all, to these books, titled the poem "Apotheosis" in the 1890 edition. Perhaps she, too, read it as an extension to the thirteenth poem; perhaps "Come Slowly" in *this* context is neither a death wish nor a "liebestod,"[8] but an extension of the drama of escape from "Alabaster Chambers." Certainly it is physically an extension of the same idea in "Just Lost," when the speaker tells the harrowing tale of a close escape from entering the "awful doors." In fact, that page contains three linked poems. Linked subliminally through iterative long e's that line the right margin (tarry/wheel/Steel/Centuries/Eden/Thee/Bee/sea/thee), they are also ordered in sense: the first (the last verse of "Just lost"), expressing a yearning to trespass mortal bounds as in "Alabaster Chambers," not literally physical death but the spiritual death in life of the timorous world of social

expectations; the second, "Come slowly," imagining a metaphysical union with a different kind of "chamber," one that provides nectar and balms experienced only by those who suspend fear and inhibitions and caution—however slowly and bashfully; and the third, "Least Rivers," a two-liner at the bottom of the page, indicating elliptically complete subsumption in a force larger and more powerful than the speaker. All three poems, often read in erotic terms, may be seen as part of another drama, that of the artist who loses self in the creative life. All three, in a sense, could be titled "apotheosis," Todd's title for "Come slowly," not so much as we think of the word today as an exalted ideal but rather as an exaltation to divine rank or stature.

Facing the three poems that build to the two-line conclusion of the fifteenth poem is the much longer "*One life* of so much / Consequence!" (J270, Fr248). That this is less a poem of sexual attraction and obsession, as Weisbuch, for example, sees it (1972, 24–25), than of the quiet drama of choosing a vocation that is borne out by poems that succeed it. Among those who read the poem as a drama of self-discovery are Greg Johnson, who says that it is not a romantic lover but Dickinson *herself* that is of so much consequence that her clarity of vision "burns" (1985, 129), and Wendy Barker, whose comments on this poem might be made as well about the fascicle's fourth poem, "The Lamp burns sure—within," suggesting once again the intertextuality of the fascicle. Barker says that in this poem "Dickinson affirms the durability of her imaginative vision. For this small, glowing circle of interiority, for this pearl of great price, the poet is willing to 'spend' her life" (1987, 116). Each significant phrase of "*One* life" points toward such a reading. Consider the way the diction of this sixteenth poem in the fascicle links to the language in the poems that surround it. The first two stanzas' willingness to spend all, to dive into a "full" sea for a priceless, special pearl, though the speaker knows it will "*cost* me—*just a life*!" takes us back to the "Least Rivers—docile to some sea. / My Caspian—thee" of the previous small poem. In the third stanza we learn that the gem for which the speaker would dive is "*Intact—in Diadem*!" That diadem, we remember, appeared at almost the same position on the page earlier in the fascicle when the departing "Sun [that]—*just touched* / the morning" disappeared, leaving "The *want* of *Diadem*!" As in this sixteenth poem, that third poem and the twelfth, the little Napoleon poem, "A little Bread" concerns self-coronation. And here we have a poem that ends: "But *Monarchs*—are *perceptible* [through an inward lamp or through the microscope?]— / Far down the dustiest Road!"

As so often the last line ("Far down . . . ") spills onto the verso side of the paper, where, as also so often, it almost becomes the title for the fascicle's next poem, the seventeenth in the series, "You're right—'the way *is* / Narrow'— (J234, Fr249). For four poems the persona has been moving toward this eschewal of the world of Safe Alabaster Chambers by moving *toward* the

greater life, the sea life, the Monarch life, the pearl and crown, the acceptance of the role of poet or at least of powerfully self-sufficient woman. With the seventeenth poem the persona demonstrates the choice she has made to reject with barely concealed scorn the polarized, mercantilistically tainted vocabulary of the Patriarchy. Those quotation marks around the biblical borrowings from Matthew 7:13–14 and the underlined words at the end underscore the disdain for what Albert Gelpi calls "the legalistic categories of the federal theology" (1965, 46). In fact, the persona speaks with such force in "broken rhythms" that Sewall likens the dramatic sense to Browning's monologues (1980, 716), reminding the fascicle reader of the other dramatic monologues within this fascicle (the first "Bee" poem; the sixth, "Tho' I get home how late"; the seventh's blushing couple; and those three short poems that followed). As are some of Browning's speakers, this speaker of Dickinson challenges accepted doctrine throughout the poem: Heaven is "'The *Good* man's—*Dividend*'— / And *Bad* men—'go to Jail' / I guess." She shows how far removed from that kind of narrowness and dusty thinking she wishes to be, how far away from the stolid who stay "Safe in their Alabaster / Chambers—" she is.

Placing the two poems opposite each other seems as pointed an editorial pairing as the prose/poetry dichotomy she presents in Fascicle 21 ("They shut me up in Prose—" [J613, Fr445] posed against "This was a Poet—" [J448, Fr446]) except that in this case the paired poems are not so much contrasts as comparisons. So we see the "narrow" road of the poem on the left poised against the sterile "Alabaster Chambers" of the darkly dead; we see the gate that is difficult to "Enter in—thereat—" poised against the Rafter and Roof of the Alabaster Chambers; we see that "*purples,*" the "price of *Breath,*" and the "*Brokers*" who dole out discounts and wages of sin and virtue are poised against the whirling world with its royal doges, even they, who must "surrender— / soundless as dots—on a / Disc of snow." At the bottom of the page, we find the "*Bad* men [who] 'go to Jail'— / I guess—" poised against Variant A: "Spring—shakes the sills— / But—the Echoes—stiffen," a horrifying version of a permanent jail, one at least as bad as those traditional hellfires against which Dickinson's Puritan forefathers warned. Such contextualizing is what makes this reader brazen enough to question the comment of Johnson that Dickinson never "completed this poem in a version that completely satisfied her." The changes made in "Safe" from the Fascicle 6 version to this one tighten the effect of implied skepticism, something Higginson, once a minister, seemed not to mind when he included this version of the duplicate poem in the thirteen poems he sent to *Century*, although he also spoke of its "too daring condensations."[9]

By the time she wrote to Higginson, Dickinson already knew for herself that this poem was alive—in both its versions. She knew, too, when she wrote Sue, that this version was "frostier." Look back at the changes: Whereas the

version in Fascicle 6 imitates in its neat calligraphy and its imagery of breezes, birds, and bees more traditional poets (in a moment I show how perfectly this fits what precedes it), this one has a more jagged, fierce look. The poet chops the first line short so that "Chambers" and later "The Resurrection" and "surrender" and "Disc of Snow" occupy their own lines, emphasizing doubt or—possibly—anger. The most obvious and telling of the other changes in the first stanza is that the "meek members" no longer "sleep"; now they "Lie." While "sleep," that which knits up the raveled sleeve of care, connotes resignation, rest, renewal, and comfort, "Lie" has more insidious possibilities. Not only does "lie" imply something stiff and inflexible (a patient lies on an operating table, an inert object, for example), but its punning possibility "weights the whole poem towards irony and skepticism" (Orsini 1981).[10]

Such unalloyed disbelief as the poem in this fascicle reveals belies the readings of those who use the version published in the 1890s' editions, combining the second stanzas of the two fascicles and omitting either of the two variants. This version with its silence and ice and mysterious discs of snow has an eerie existential emptiness and loneliness; its white nothingness reflects Melville's whiteness chapter and previews Frost's "Snow falling fast, oh fast" with its "blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression—nothing to express." There seems a gulf of teleological acceptance between the lines of the poem in this fascicle and the poet's letter to Judge Lord near the end of her life that "On subjects of which we know nothing . . . we both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (L750).[11] With such adamant disbelief as this version of "Safe" projects "the court [of Heaven]" must have seemed very "far away," which is how she begins the nineteenth poem in Fascicle 10.

Virtually every line of "Safe," in fact, is witness to Dickinson's weaving skill. This repeated but radically altered poem, read as it almost never is in its fascicle setting, suggests, as well as concatenates against, other poems within the book. Check the list: The morning that cannot touch the meek members recalls the fascicle's eleventh poem, in which Dickinson likens sunrise to the busy actions of children; meek members are those who are so imprudent as not to use a microscope. "Grand go the years" recalls the "Centuries of Way" of the sixth poem, and the Firmaments that "row" and the worlds that scoop their arcs appeared in the rotations of sunrise and sunset of the tenth poem, which in turn picked up the image of the teasing Sun touching and leaving Morning in the third; in turn, that image returns in the twenty-second ("I've nothing else—to bring" [J224, Fr253]), the fascicle's last poem. Diadems and Doges, too, appeared in the preference for the crown over marbles in the second, and so forth. Both "Midnight" and "Eclipse" appear in the fascicle's twentieth poem ("If *He dissolve* [J236, Fr251]). Finally, the last lines of the first variant, "Staples of Ages—have / buckled—there" holds, as the *OED*

reveals, a possible link in imagery with the preceding poem. "You're right—the way *is* / narrow." Cynthia Griffin Wolff reminds us that "staples" might be the nails that fixed Christ to the cross (1986, 319), but Dickinson's own dictionary provides several other possible meanings for "staples" and hence for the line and the entire poem: The Saxon root of the word, says Webster, is to set or fix. The line may mean, then, that those notions fixed in orthodoxy have buckled. The dictionary continues with the familiar meaning of principal commodities so that the line may also refer to economic certainties that have perished. It may, yes, even in 1828, the date of one of her Webster's, be that metal loop that holds manuscripts together; thus, the line may imply that meaning itself has buckled. The *OED* provides one more secondary meaning. A staple is a mineshaft smaller than the principal one. If that buckles, the collapsed dark interiority is like polar darkness.

There is no resurrection here. Spring, a metonymy for resurrection, unavailingly shakes the "seals." The "Song of Solomon" (8:6) admonishes believers to set God like "seals" on their hearts. A seal is an "act of confirmation": It is a "royal mark . . . [and] a mark of property." A seal may indicate a promise or contract, but here, in "Safe" in "Alabaster Chambers," the word in its stiff context implies the brokenness of that contract. In the end, all that has stapled the ages, all of the seals that promised meaning rather than silence, disappear: "Staples—of Ages—have buckled—there—" or, as she puts it in the next variant, "Midnight in Marble— / Refutes—the Suns—."

Having pushed the stiff, cold, distant, meek members as far down and narrow as possible, Dickinson returns to a conversational tone with "The court is far away— / No Umpire—have I—" (J235, Fr250). "*That*—Empire—is of Czars— /As small—they say—as I," she continues. The Empire, the court from which the speaker is excluded, is "Umpire-less," lacking an intercessor, but the notion that the Czar and she are equal shifts the tone from pathos to assertiveness. By the end of the poem with all of its royal imagery, the speaker meditating on the vagaries of Grace (Christ being the sought-after "Umpire," the one who might "intercede" for her—or *not*) has declared the outrageous (to those "meek members"): She has dared to suggest that she, the poet, and the Savior could share or even swap roles. When she asks for the power to intercede, she is asking for what a poet has: the power "to mediate; to interpose." After all, Emerson had implied as much in his catalogue of roles the poet holds: "Sayer, Priest, Announcer." Dickinson's delight in wordplay might have led her also to consider the germinal activity of the poet's process and effect, the poet as interseed-er.[12] If the court is so distant that she disbelieves she will enter, the poet has one recourse: through her art to take control of power otherwise denied her. Her texts make permeable the borders of faith and doubt, acceptance and rejection, light and dark; they are her way of wresting control from patriarchal systems, of worsting God.

The fascicle is closing. On the next pages, the compiler arranges two poems, twenty and twenty-one in the series, which seem opposing voices in this fascicle's drama of the speaker's continuing religious quest. Consider the many ways the first of the two, "If *He dissolve*—then—there / is *nothing—more* (J236, Fr251) is echoed by the next poem, "I think just how my shape / will rise—" (J237, Fr252). Indeed, if the echo isn't exact, the fascicle reader again sees the way images answer each other, concatenate against each other. The poem on the left, "If *He dissolve,*" is marked by negation, darkness, and blindness, all familiar from previous poems in the fascicle. It is full of absences: the possible dissolution of faith (deistic or mortal); the blank "*nothing—more*"; the totality of "Eclipse" (a reprise from "Alabaster's" "Tribes of Eclipse"). It reverses expected hope: not Easter sunrise but "sunset," not the bright hope of Christmas but "*Faint* Star of Bethlehem— / *Gone Down*!" Such is the first half of "If *He dissolve*" on the left. On the right are the first two stanzas of "I think just how my shape / will rise," in which the speaker meditates on the very elements of faith she has just negated. Characteristically she hyperbolizes them, picturing what it would be like to be "forgiven," the word that appears twice in the poem—both times in the quotation marks that usually signal irony, an irony sharpened by its rhyme with the last word, "unshriven."

Answering—or continuing—the eclipse and darkness of a faith that fails, there would be, the speaker suggests, an equal disappearance act should she be granted grace and gathered "*Out of Sight*—in Heaven." That is, after all, where the meek members go. On the other hand, if the Star of Bethlehem, faint at that, go down (in the poem on the left), there seems some tiny hope (in that on the right) as the speaker quotes the Christ who was born by that star. Paraphrasing Luke 12:6, the speaker thinks of the weight of the Gospel's words: "that you—*do* [so?]—*late*—'*Consider' me* / The 'sparrow' of your care."

Suffering (near death) is the focus of the third and fourth verses of both poems as they face each other. Again, the poem on the left is darker, more urgent, as the speaker implores intercession—a reverse intercession from the biblical idea that the *person* of Christ informs God on behalf of man: "*Would* not some *God inform* / Him—" that the speaker is dying, perhaps as a later poet put it, "piecemeal of emotional anaemia" (Ezra Pound's "The Garden")? Dickinson's words are not that different: "Say—that a *little life*—for / *His*— / is *leaking—red*." The reader may be horrified at the next line, as the speaker calls herself "*His little Spaniel*"—and many have discussed it,[13] but the next line "*Will he heed?*" need not be submissive and plaintive; it might be the way the fawning dog demands dominion over the master.

The question ("Will he heed?") might also be a bridge in the dramatic construction of the fascicle, a bridge between the statement of dark despair in "If *He dissolve,*" on the left, and "I think just how my shape will rise," on the right. There's a conversation, too, in another set of answering lines. Opposite

the image on the left of a mortal, bloody wound of the deserted speaker ("A *little life*—for / *His* / Is *leaking*—red") is the third verse of "I think just how," offering specious solace. As with the quotation-marked sparrow in the previous stanza, this pious hope rings hollow. The persona is not comforted by the biblical promise. The hollow ring of quotations in the second of the paired poems ("Consider" me / the "Sparrow" and "forgiven" in "I think just how") seems to signal the tenuous beliefs of those "meek members of the Resurrection."

The last lines on the back page further shatter any platitudinous comfort the speaker has suggested: "Until—delirious—borne— / By *trust*— / I drop my Heart—*unshriven*!" Recalling that the fascicle began with the poem that, when the book is opened, is opposite to these lines, "We—Bee and I." In that opening poem the Bee seems delirious in another sense so that the fascicle reader is struck by the movement in this book from relatively carefree images of drunken bees, industrious angels, and sunrises to this last page on which all of that bright hope and trust that has made the speaker delirious and that all of those "meek members" probably believed ends: The speaker says, "I *drop* my Heart—*unshriven*." The words recall the eighteenth poem, in which diadems dropped, but in this poem it is faith itself that drops. Conning that verb "drop" (as the speaker does with "Forgiven") may make one think of the expulsion from Eden of the first couple; it may connote the clumsiness of one delirious in some way, or—radically different from such suggestions—it may suggest assumed power. This drop may not be accidental; it is willed. All options have dissolved, based as they were on empty promises. "Unshriven"—separated from its referent (I), isolated by the dash, and punctuated with a heavy exclamation point—challenges orthodoxy.

If the speaker fails to achieve, fails, in fact, to ask for forgiveness of the master or lord, whether mortal or theistic, the speaker in the twenty-first poem seems on the way to becoming the woman whose power is in her art. That is what she says in the last powerful (but largely ignored) poem:

> I've nothing else—to bring,
> You know—
> So I keep bringing These—
> Just as the Night keeps
> fetching stars
> To our familiar Eyes—
> Maybe, we should'nt mind them
> Unless they did'nt come—
> Then—maybe it would puzzle us
> To find our way Home— (J224, Fr253)

Dickinson sent an only slightly different copy of this poem to Bowles, Johnson guesses, with some flowers (1958, I:161). From the tone and context in this fascicle, however, the pronoun referent might not be flowers but poems. For the poet, triumphant over a disappearing sun and a disappointing God, the poems so carefully woven together ward off bewilderment about the "way Home." That Home may be the one on Main Street, inhabited by the stern father; perhaps it is the silent, waiting home, site of the sixth poem of this fascicle, the dramatic "Tho' I get home how late— / how late." Read another way, the home may be the one that will substitute for the Court that is so far away, a more hospitable home than the one believed in by the "meek members of the resurrection" who now lie, cold, cheated, marbleized, in their "Safe" Alabaster Chambers. The "home" with which she ends Fascicle 10 involves risk; it involves the making of poetry.

"I keep bringing these— / Just as the Night keeps / fetching stars," she has declared. Fascicle reading reveals how carefully contrived, how variable in mood, how complex in structure are her collections of "these." Such a study shows that the same poem ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"), keynote of both fascicles, radiates out also within Fascicle 6 in a radically different way. Whereas we have seen it in Fascicle 10 as part of a grim investigation of options that threaten to cut the speaker from her authentic voice, much more briefly let us see how "Safe" (or an early version of it) acts in Fascicle 6 as a grave but also playful jibe at those incapable of flight and fun.

Laughing Light: Alabaster Chambers in Fascicle 6

No less heterodox in its context in Fascicle 6 than in Fascicle 10, the early version of the poem, the one that Sue challenged Emily to improve, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" looks and means something different in this earlier context. In the first place, it shares the page with another verse from another poem, one that prepares for its particular thrust. In the second place, it looks much neater—and is. As Sharon Cameron points out, Dickinson's early "publications" appear much more finished than the later ones (1992, 8). Not until Fascicle 5 do those cross marks show up, offering us multiple possibility words. Fascicle 10's version of "Safe" with its two whole verses as options or additions is a fascinating oddity. Fascicle 6's poem seems more benign, tidily positioned between two almost horizontal lines. And its diction more nearly fits the lighter tone of this book. If Fascicle 10 seems bitter, Fascicle 6 is more ironic, sarcastic—and lighter. Its first poem, "Who never lost are unprepared" (J73, Fr136), begins the fascicle with a traditional idea (and with three words important in Fascicle 10 as well: a Coronet, an Emperor, and the "cooling Tamarind"). The idea is one of Dickinson's most often explored: that loss and pain, particularly that achieved in battle, sweetens the prize. The notion that at death an Angel

might "Write 'Promoted' / On this Soldier's brow!" anticipates breezes that might laugh at the dead interred in Alabaster Chambers below. Written before the Civil War, this poem embodies idealized battle, not the literal "Scarlet Maryland" of "When I was small, a / Woman died" (J596, Fr518, F24). "Who never lost" envisages another kind of life, death, and scarring. As Barton Levi St. Armand notes, Dickinson "knew two kinds of death" (1984, 100). With less fierceness than in the Fascicle 10 version, "Safe" suggests those two kinds: the complete nonlife of the "meek members of the Resurrection"—in both senses. These members may be literally dead, but the poet's focus is on their spiritual, intellectual deadness: on the "stolid ear" that cannot perceive the light laughing breeze or the babbling bee, representatives of another kind of life.

Much less exhaustively than with the three fascicles I've already discussed, I want to show how "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" is as appropriate to the tone and collection of image clusters in Fascicle 6 as the later version with its variants is for Fascicle 10. Reading the fascicles attentively allows us to see that what Curran said of Wordsworth's collection, *Poems in Two Volumes,* is as true for Dickinson as it was for Wordsworth: Both are "in ceaseless motion among contraries; but in their composite unity, there is the undoubted equipoise of a great artistic vision" (Curran 1986, 238). By tracing my reading of these four fascicles and offering some further observations in the next two chapters I do not mean to foist one interpretation over another. Rather, I hope to interest others to focus their Dickinson reading on doing so in the context she provided, to join what Rosenthal and Gall called the "revolution."

"Revolution": That is the crux of the little poem about two flowers (ladies), second in the series, "A Lady red—amid the Hill" (J74, Fr137), a poem that ends by implying the benefits of revolution, change, risk. The flowers bloom, they change when the "tidy Breezes" come, perhaps the same breeze we feel in the to-be-repeated "Safe." The kind of Revolution experienced by the "ladies" is, as the last line of the second poem, says—slantwise—"strange." There is an archness in that nonchalant Hedge that doesn't recognize the Springtime Revolution, and there is an archness, too, in the lines that face those, the end of "To fight aloud, is very brave—" (J126, Fr138). There the "Angels go / Rank after Rank, with even feet— / And Uniforms of Snow." Those uniforms are what interests me in the context of the tone of this fascicle. Used by Dickinson only in this one poem, the word used as a synonym for an outfit or costume turns those "angels" into visions of cloudiness. However, as a synonym for that which carries the insignia of rank and that which deindividualizes its wearers, it conveys Dickinson's disdain for those who dwell in the "Safe . . . Alabaster Chambers" of the twelfth poem. Under "uniform," in fact, in Dickinson's dictionary, appears this sentence: "It is the duty of a Christian to observe a uniform course of piety and religion."

Indeed, one turns the page and finds the speaker refuting that duty in "'Houses'—so the Wise Men tell me—" (J127, Fr139), the fourth in the series. The apparent plaintive tone belies the acerbity one hears reading the poem in its context—though even without the acerbic "Safe" and other contextual clues the poem itself seems sarcastic: Again there are those telltale quotation marks around the biblical passages; there is the arch tone of "so the Wise Men tell me"; and there are those slantwise subjunctive lines. Mansions must (we think: "should") be warm, must exclude the storm, must be snugly built. These mansions (players with language will think: man/scions—the patriarchal constructions) are built by "his Father," whom—with devastating parenthetical understatement—the speaker claims not to know. Finally, "Could the Children find the way there— / Some, would even trudge tonight," implying, of course, that they cannot find that mansion/bastion of the traditional story and they will not trudge. Of course, they may be better off: They might not end up in "Safe Alabaster Chambers" to be laughed at by the breeze and babbled at by the bee. As if freed from such constraint, the next, much longer, more fanciful poem, "Bring me the sunset in a cup" (J128, Fr140), shouts with a kind of children's glee in a series of demands and questions, all leading to the desire "to fly away, / Passing Pomposity." Not to want "Uniforms of Snow," not to want entombment, wanting, rather, to be free from Pomposity: This is the thrust of the repeated "Alabaster Chambers" poem—in this fascicle.

As the fascicle moves on toward that focus poem, the next four poems all feature images of escape, specifically the escape of a female figure who feels trapped or entombed. After a whimsical "She died at play" (J75, Fr141), a meditation, presumably, about day but easily analogous to the concerns of someone *not* wanting to be stifled and kept from playing, the editor of this small volume places a triumphant poem of perfect freedom. Listen to Wendy Barker on the seventh poem, "Cocoon above! Cocoon below!" (J129, Fr142): "The poet's primary business is paradoxically the result of constriction and isolation within the smallest and most universal of all dark interiors, that of the embryo. The poet, like the embryonic butterfly or bird, must relish silent nourishment from the dark circle of interiority" (1987, 123). And Barbara Mossberg extends the image. The poet daughter, says Mossberg, "is the cocoon, bursting with words, yet confined and shut up; she has a 'secret' creation no one can see; her dutiful daughter contains, protects, and hides her present and future greatness as a poet" (1982, 172). Although neither Barker nor Mossberg is speaking of the poem in its fascicle context, the descriptions of both explain the way the imagery of this seventh poem prepares for "Safe" and the way it meshes with the poems surrounding it. This cocoon will be transformed to something so free that it competes with the laughing breeze and babbling bees above the "Alabaster Chambers." In her Butterfly form she will take "A moment to interrogate, / Then wiser than a 'Surrogate', / The

Universe to know!" Lawyer Dickinson's daughter would know that "surrogate's" secondary meaning is "Judge of probate / wills and testaments." Whether she is challenging our own "surrogate" (Christ?) or her own father and his peers, she is claiming grand power. That power leads to the next poem, in which she defines and gives a giddy edge to the poet's definition of "Exultation."

According to the editor of Fascicle 6, "Exultation is the going / Of an inland soul to sea" (J76, Fr143). In going "Past the houses— / past the headlands— / Into deep Eternity," the speaker escapes the fate of those entombed in "Alabaster Chambers," heedless of breezes, bees, and laughter. This expansive, joyous poem shares space on the page with "I never hear the word 'Escape'" (J77, Fr144), an eight-liner that continues the theme, opposing "A flying attitude!" to imprisonment, specifically to being a child "at my bars," struggling and failing to escape. This image returns in another poem about children (flowers) in their cribs near the end of the fascicle. Meanwhile, Dickinson has chosen what would become one of her most discussed and quoted poems to face the "Exultation" and "Escape" poems, both of which express a wistfulness for freedom.

"These are the days when Birds come back—" (J130, Fr122) is, of course, more than one of the most heartbreaking poems ever written about "Indian Summer," its rather reductive title in the 1890 edition. That the author realized her success seems clear; the poem exists in at least three versions, the other two differing little from this one, where, positioned between the wistful children and an acerbic poem about traditional (male/old) writers on Autumn, its meaning unfolds incrementally. Here the poet, cannier than those "Wise Men" (from the "Mansion" poem several pages earlier) who would offer unconvincing solace, spurns the "sophistries of June":

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

"Fraud" leaps out, especially in relation to the reference in the "Mansion" poem to the children who "don't know" the Father and who "could [not] find the way there." In such a context, this reads as a poem of spiritual longing and loss.

The tone (but not the import) changes to exasperation and self-determination in the poem that follows the final stanza, a stanza in which the outcast child asks to share the "sacred Emblems." "Besides the Autumn poets—sing" (J131, Fr123), says the sharp-tongued speaker as though it's not enough to be denied belief in sacred scripture; besides that, one cannot count on the secular scripture of romantic poetry. The skepticism and sadness of "These are the Days when

Perhaps a Squirrel may remain
My sentiments to share.
Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind
Thy windy will to bear!

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection
Rafter of Satin
And Roof of Stone.

Light laughs the breeze
In her Castle above them,
Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear,
Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant Cadence
Ah, what sagacity perished here!

Perhaps no "duplicate" poem shows so dramatically how reading "Poems in their Places" yield more possibilities for interpretation than those read out of the context supplied by Dickinson. In Fascicle 6 (about 1859 and written on the same stock of paper as Fascicle 8, the first version in the smaller handwriting of the earlier years follows the last verse of "Besides the Autumn Poets—sing" (J216, Fr123). In this fascicle the context is far less dark

X

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

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

Springs - shake the sills -
But - the Echoes - stiffen -
Hoar - is the window -

than that in Fascicle 10 (about 1860), in which Dickinson suggests an eerie existential emptiness of "dots—on a Disc of snow—" Much has been written about these changing versions, including the six pages in Franklin's *Variorum* (I, 159–64), but little has been made of the context provided by the fascicle settings. Printed by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Birds come back" merges into the outright scorn for the "Autumn poets" in the poem Sandra Gilbert calls "an élliptical expression of literary scorn" (1986, 132). The "child" cannot trust—cannot participate in—either sacred or secular scriptures: not the invitation of the Last Supper nor the poems of those such as Bryant and Thompson, whom, Capps says, Dickinson "loved" (1966, 111). It is tempting to think that the "blue and gold mistake" in the previous poem might be a pun on the most famous Autumn poem, which begins "Seasons of *mists* and mellow fruitfulness," turning the idealizations of Keats into an *ache* in the woman who also recognizes the hazards in the haze. Dickinson linked the two poems ("These are the days" and "Besides the Autumn poets sing") in sending them together to Bowles, about whose tin ear Sewall berates with the kind of scorn Dickinson showed for her Autumn poets: "Both of these are so superior to the verses the *Republican* habitually honored as to defy comparison" (1974/1980, 476).

Midway through the poem, "autumn" blends into a frozen stillness. The eyes of elves, says the speaker, are touched by "mesmeric fingers," as if somehow the poets, as the season, have the power to hypnotize one to sleep, a sleep that is the subject of the next poem. She ends her poem about the "prosaic," "incisive," and "ascetic" season—and poets—with a kind of shrug of her shoulders, one that leads directly—in the space it occupies and the sense it conveys—to the poem she repeats in Fascicle 10 in such a different form. These lines lead to the Alabaster Chambers, which follow on the same page:

> Perhaps a squirrel may remain—
> My sentiments to share—
> Grant me, oh Lord, a sunny mind—
> Thy windy will to bear!

Below these lines there's the neat horizontal line and then the poem around which this chapter revolves and toward which this fascicle has been surging.

"Still" and "Sealed" in the "Autumn Poets" poem prepare the reader for the sealed Alabaster Chamber, and this stanza, which spills into the space of the Alabaster Chamber, seems an inscription for it. The playful squirrel prayer appears to be to God, whose will may blow haphazardly and not always pleasantly in those cold Puritan New England churches. "Will," that loaded word in those churches, appears significantly in the inscription in the book that Benjamin Lease tells us influenced "These are the days" (1990, 54–55). Here is what is written on the inscription page of Dickinson's own copy of the *Imitation of Christ,* which makes doubly poignant the disappointment of the speaker in some of this fascicle's poems:

His will entire be God's will resign'd,
And what pleas'd God, pleas'd his devoted mind
Thrice happy saint, remote from haunts of ill,
Employed in hymn, and dispossess'd of will.

The *Imitation* continues, "O Jesu, teach me like thyself to fly / This poisonous world, and all its charms defy." The Amherst poet begs with less sincerity. In the first place, the speaker does want her own will; that of the deity is windy, with all of the connotations that word carries of pomposity as well as of shiftiness. One squints at the manuscript, too, wondering whether "will" could be confused with "wile," partly because of the poem's placement in the fascicle. Dickinson is about to address the frigid rigidity of those who are unthinkingly attentive and faithful to the windy will of this God.

Before exploring the poem, now in its fascicle place, I offer this observation (yet again) on the symmetry of the pages. On the left, the western side, of the open book and opposite them on the right, the eastern side, are the little prayers that are the last lines of two poems and simultaneously the prefaces of those that follow ("Thy sacred emblems to partake . . . " on the left; "Grant me, oh Lord, a sunny mind . . ." on the right). Almost exactly opposite each other, below the little prayers are the characteristic Dickinson dark lines separating one poem from another and also calling attention to the way one may read the pages horizontally as well as vertically: Opposite the stanza on the snow, haze, and prosaic days of "Autumn Poets" is the stanza on the stolid stillness of the meek members of the Resurrection; opposite the stanza on the stillness of winter is the stanza on the movement of life above the casket of the dead.

Those may be the physically dead, of course, but given the context of this fascicle and the nature of the exchange with Sue about the poem, they may be—more likely are—the dead in life. Before exploring that pivotal poem, I tender another word about this stanza that forms a bridge between the two poems, an epigraph of sorts to those "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers." Braving the still, sealed winter world of the "Autumn Poets," the squirrel is the creature with which Dickinson identifies. In other poems the squirrel is almost always in motion, like the child who appears in other poems of the fascicle. It is "rampant," "giddy," "running," and "playing."[14] As in Emerson's "Fable," the squirrel is the tiny principle that is the equal of the gigantic Himmeleh (in J862, Fr506, "light" is equally accessible to both). When the squirrel/poet/speaker begs for "a sunny mind" to bear "the windy will of God," she suggests that the Calvinist deity is literally in harmony with winter. Judged by its juxtaposition on the page with "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," it appears that what is hardest for the speaker to bear of the windy will at odds with her own Power is not necessarily physical death but a torpid state of life suggested in the richly textured two stanzas of this version of J216, Fr124.

The first line of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" conveys the saccharine niceness of funeral parlors. It is fussy and feminine as in "Sweet—safe—Houses" (J457, Fr684, F32), where the chambers are lined with satin. The Alabaster Chambers are hardly the "Chambers of the Cedars" in "I dwell in Possibility" (J657, Fr466, F22). Rather, this hard white gypsum belongs to the House of Prose. Dickinson's lexicon notes that Alabaster is also a measurement for wine or oil, reminding us of the child who wanted to join the feast of bread and wine. In these hard, unyielding, overly ornate compartments or chambers sleep the meek members of the Resurrection. A less-loaded verb than the "lie" in the Fascicle 10 version, "sleep" is nevertheless intensified by its near rhyme. These are the "meek" who should be inheriting the earth. These are the opposite of the squirrel/child/poet of the fascicle's earlier poems who claim a kind of power. As in the squirrel image of the previous poem (and so many others), this one owes much to Emerson. In "Brahma" he declares with the kind of scorn we see in this series of Dickinson poems, "Thou meek lover of the good / Find me [Brahma] and turn your back on heaven." Dickinson's speaker seems to have heeded Emerson's strong, heterodox words. It would be better, she suggests, to do just that, turn away from the meek members assembled and find a life free of dichotomies such as good/evil, devils/angels, comfort/pain. It would be better to be "ignorant" of expected drawing room codes, undependable bible stories, and autumn poets. It would be better to be one with the laughing breeze and the babbling bee, both of which, of course, are loaded with metaphoric possibilities to the Dickinson reader.

The fascicle reader turns the page to find one of Dickinson's most trenchant parodies, "A poor—torn heart" (J78, Fr125). Such a tone is suggested by more than one context of the "torn heart"; along with the poems that precede it and at least one of the four poems that follow and complete the book, it has another context, a note to Sue accompanied by a representation of Dickens's lugubrious Little Nell's mourning grandfather (Capps, 97; Martha Nell Smith has also discussed this at length). In this thirteenth poem, angels pick up the sorrowful heart "Intent upon the vision / Of latitudes unknown" (we smile at the echo of "flying attitudes" in the ninth poem, "I never hear the word 'escape'") and carry it to God in the "blue havens" (the laughing breeze blowing over the Alabaster Chambers). The figure in the poem seems to be a child, as is the figure pleading to be allowed to the sacrament in the tenth poem.

On the other hand, between this poem and one that continues the lighter tone of this fascicle (lighter than the later Fascicle 10 anyway), is the utterly serious, stunningly heterodox "I bring an unaccustomed wine" (J132, Fr126), the fourteenth in the series. It was "thine immortal wine" for which the speaker of the tenth poem longed and from which she felt excluded and cheated; here the speaker is no longer begging but giving. She has the power

to save others with the draught she once lacked. Not another version of death, this poem posits a way to live in the face of death akin to that of the Christian existentialist. The wine may not save the thirsty, but the speaker continues to "bear the cup" to slake the thirst of one who may be able to drink it. Put another way, as poetry itself is an "unaccustomed wine," she offers her poetry that it may satisfy another. Before the poem ends, its quoted line "Unto the little unto me" (Matt. 25:40) recalls the New Testament's central message and also recalls the continuing presence of the child in this fascicle. The last line jolts with its apparently nonsequitous follow-up: "When I at last awake." Reading the poem in this its fascicle place clarifies its mystery. "When I at last awake" from that metaphoric alabaster chamber of a death in life, then I will be able to bring the sunset in a cup or join the laughing breeze, babbling brook, and busy bees.

"When I at last awake" is opposed in the next poem, situated just below it on the page, "As Children bid the Guest 'Good Night'" (J133, Fr127). The slaked lips of the fourteenth poem become the "pretty lips" of flowers in this fifteenth poem. In the first stanza the children (flowers), "reluctant turn," rather like those in Longfellow's sonnet "Nature" in which the about-to-die are compared to children who don't know how much they need to sleep and how wonderful "the unknown" beyond will be. Harking back to the fascicle's sixth poem, "She died at play," the alliterative second stanza likens heaven to a garden or a playground:

> As children caper when they wake
> Merry that it is morn
> My flowers from a hundred cribs
> Will peep and prance again.

These capering, prancing children, risen freshly awake from their cribs, seem reenactments of the fascicle's most celebrated poem, the soon-to-be-rewritten "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers." Here, too, the children have been well behaved in their safe (perhaps satin-lined) homes, well trained in manners by some careful mommy. But they break the bonds of convention, refusing to be interred in the safe chambers. As they rise from their cribs, they suggest the bars tugged at by the speaker of the fascicle's ninth poem. These children have come uncribbed in the fullest meaning of the word. Dickinson's dictionary lists not only a manger and a small cottage under "crib" but also the verb: "to shut or confine in a narrow habitation; to cage." These children are so uncribbed, in fact, that they break some basic societal taboos: They "peep" and "prance." Although the poet is speaking overtly of flowers peeping over the rims of their boxes, she has placed the poem in this context in which it is legitimate to see the metaphoric children as naughty enough to "peep," not

only violating discretion and privacy but also peeping into the sacred, seeing through façades, investigating the forbidden. This is the business of the poet who says "My business is, to Find!" ("I cautious, scanned my little life—" [J178, Fr175, F8]). The children may not be waking up in another life, not, certainly, in the conventional heaven of "meek" members of churches. They may be waking up to the heaven that is on earth if one is uncribbed.

Such is the powerful implication of the penultimate poem in the sequence. As a musician friend pointed out about an Aaron Copland setting of this poem, the first five notes of "Going to Heaven!" (J79, Fr128) are sung in exactly the upwardly rising inflection of the stationmaster's call. Not only that, says Maryann Sewell, a student of Dickinson in music and a performer of many of the settings, but the closing words, "the ground," come down hard; they seem to be Copland's parody of "amen." Sewell's observation and the wit of her own performance perhaps influences my reading of this poem, which might otherwise—like "A poor torn heart"—seem pious, albeit puzzling. But Sewell's interpretation of Copland's interpretation is perfectly consistent with the context of the spunky poem. The voice seems that of the child, an "astonished" one who doesn't like the "dim" sound of the place (those Alabaster Chambers, after all) and tries to convince herself of the value of the destination by reminding herself of Sunday school teachings: "And yet it will be done / As sure as flocks go home at night / Unto the Shepherds' arm." The child of an earlier poem kissing or hugging the guest with the Good Night becomes the sheep heading into the Shepherd's arm.

In the second stanza, too, the speaker is a child, perhaps whispering conspiratorially to another child, asking him or her to "Save just a little place for me / Close to the two I lost!" Remember the opening poem of this fascicle: "Who never lost are unprepared / A Coronet to find!" The parallel is intensified in the next line; the speaker specifies the garb appropriate for heaven: "the smallest 'Robe' . . . and just a bit of Crown." Further, "Going home," the phrase the child speaker uses at the end of the second stanza as a euphemism for heaven, calls us back to the "Houses" and "Mansions" of the fascicle's fourth poem, the claustrophobic "Alban House" of the fifth poem, and "Alabaster Chambers" of the twelfth. The indeterminate pronouns of the final stanza ("I'm glad I don't believe *it* / . . . I'm glad they did believe *it*") seems pretty clear by this time in the fascicle. Although the first "it" may refer to the line just before (that the friend will go ahead and save a place), more probably it harks back to the poem's opening: that the speaker is going to Heaven to be gathered in like a lamb to the fold. Such orthodox assurances from the meek members of the resurrection are not for this feisty speaker, who nevertheless is glad that her departed friends had the faith that made their dying easier. A third "it" in the poem: "For it would stop my breath—" seems less indeterminate; what would kill the poet would be an easy belief.

As the poem that she repeats in Fascicle 10 implies, being shut up in "Alabaster Chambers"—Jane Eberwein likens them to bank vaults (1985, 32)—is no fun. This speaker is greedy for a full, fancy-filled, frolicking life: "I'd like to look a little more / At such a curious earth." Many things are "curious" to the poet: trinkets/flowers, a cloud, the memory of the past, God, and "His memorial institution," communion.[15] The "curious Earth" of this poem contains such poet's human activities as "health, and laughter, curious things" in "I cried at Pity—not at Pain—" (J588, Fr394, F19). All that comprises the active, probing life on a solid earth, then, is privileged over the safe sleep of death as Dickinson's "Alabaster Chambers" poem in all of its versions insists. The specious solace of "Autumn poets," reprised in the last line of "Going to Heaven" in "the mighty Autumn afternoon / I left them in the ground," and the "sophistries" of Indian Summer have failed to comfort this speaker/child/lover of earth.

Sharing the page with this declaration—that life fully and even dangerously lived is preferable to the death in life of unquestioning acceptance of social conventions in Alabaster Chambers or the religious dogma of the windy preachers about the windy will of God—is this final poem:

> Our lives are Swiss—
> So still—so Cool—
> Till some odd afternoon
> The Alps neglect their Curtains
> And we look—farther on!
>
> *Italy* stands the other side!
> While like a guard between
> The solemn Alps!
> The siren Alps
> Forever intervene! (J80, Fr129)

The afternoon of the burial service with its amen thud of finality has become in this last poem of the fascicle a day of revelation, of unveiling of mystery. Implicating us ("we") in her discovery, Dickinson works with three geographical metaphors parallel to image clusters from throughout the fascicle, but particularly in the Alabaster Chambers.

In the first, those meek members immured in Alabaster are Swiss: "so still—so Cool" and so Calvinist. Geneva (Dickinson's closest other reference to Switzerland is in "Geneva's farthest skill" in "A Clock stopped" [J287, Fr259, F11]), the birthplace of John Calvin, resonates in opposite ways from *Italy*, a country that obviously intrigued and attracted Dickinson. Even had the Brownings not lived there, Dickinson (the Dickinson whose persona rejects safe Alabaster Chambers) might have been intrigued with the country noted in one

of her textbooks for its "low delights" as opposed to Switzerland with its "nobler race" (Capps, 107–8). But the Brownings did live there. Italy was the location of poetic power. Between the Swiss serenity and stolidity and the Italian vividness the cloud-curtained Alps stand guard. Between the imaginative play of breeze and bee, of the scampering squirrel and the adventurer who assumes a feisty, risking "flying attitude" on the one hand and the obedient children kissing guests, the autumn poets who revere what the poet sees as specious sophistries and false promises on the other, the curtains are usually drawn. In the words of a *Harper's* journal Dickinson may well have read, the Alps' Mount Blanc "seems so near the sky that the blue firmament kisses its brow. It is so far off, yet so near, so bright and pure, that angels might be sporting on its summit and be safe from the intrusion of men. It is a *solemn* mountain" (from *Harper's* 14 [1856–1857]: 740). The unnamed author of this passage (721–40) describes Mont Blanc as Dickinson does in this fascicle's final poem: "[A] cloud is gathered like a halo on its head; but it rises and vanishes." Just so, in Dickinson's poem "The Alps neglect their Curtains / And we look farther on."[16]

In this context, as the culmination of a gathering of poems about two ways to live, the "daring figure" posits, as Greg Johnson puts it, the "sheltered" and inviolate geographical positions of Switzerland against the "celestial city," reached only through the "siren Alps," through which the quester must pass (1985, 146). The quester, however, cannot pass, as this poem implies, because the "solemn, siren" Alps "Forever intervene." "Our lives are Swiss" would then seem a wistful if not mournful end for a book that includes so much play. Perhaps it is, but before one closes the book, one is rewarded by a close look at the back of the opened book. Following Dickinson's advice to read backward (prose fragment 30), the reader notes that with the book opened, the last poem, now on the west side, becomes a preface for the first, now on the east side. As elsewhere—in Fascicles 1, 3, 14, and 40, for example—the circularity provided by reading the poems "backwards" in this way provides new interpretive possibilities. In Fascicle 6 the stanzas on our Swiss lives so far from the richer shores of *Italy,* so unattainable, are opposite the second stanza of "Who never lost," the first in the sequence:

> Who never climbed the weary league—
> Can such a foot explore
> The purple territories
> On Pizarro's shore?

Italy's dark mysteries and Pizarro's exotic Shores[17] were withheld to all but those who brave the siren Alps or the dangerous seas, those who travel weary leagues away from the safety of Alabaster Chambers toward the locus of the poetic imagination.

That Dickinson intended such linkages is suggested by a detail outside this fascicle: some three years after she laced together the seventeen poems of Fascicle 6, this book's version of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" was printed by Bowles. For this version, identical (but for punctuation and lineation) to that in Fascicle 6, Dickinson had appended a line of reference: "Pelham Hill, June 1861." In his variorum Thomas Johnson remarks that she had done so because she may have remembered a visit to an old burying ground there. No doubt that is true, but reading the poem in this fascicle suggests another reason for the mountain image. Of course, we cannot know what she intended and what happened serendipitously. Intentionality, that contested and unanswerable ground, is slippery. How can we measure the distance between what the artist put there and what we find there? Does it matter, just so long as we stick with what actually exists on the pages, always watchful for inferences? By reading what she selected to be seen and read in a particular order and grouping in the (I hope not too painfully) detailed method through the first four chapters, we become participatory readers of texts full of surprises.

Rereading Dickinson in this manner may reify her poems, or it may revolutionize our interpretation of individual poems. In the next chapter I wrestle with what these books may have been to her, and in the next, the penultimate one, I suggest some similar pleasures from other fascicles and face those hard questions of intentionality, hoping that Dickinson would say again, "The poets light but— / Lamps— / Themselves go out" (J883, F930 Set 5), as she encourages us to *see* the refractions of the lamps she lit.