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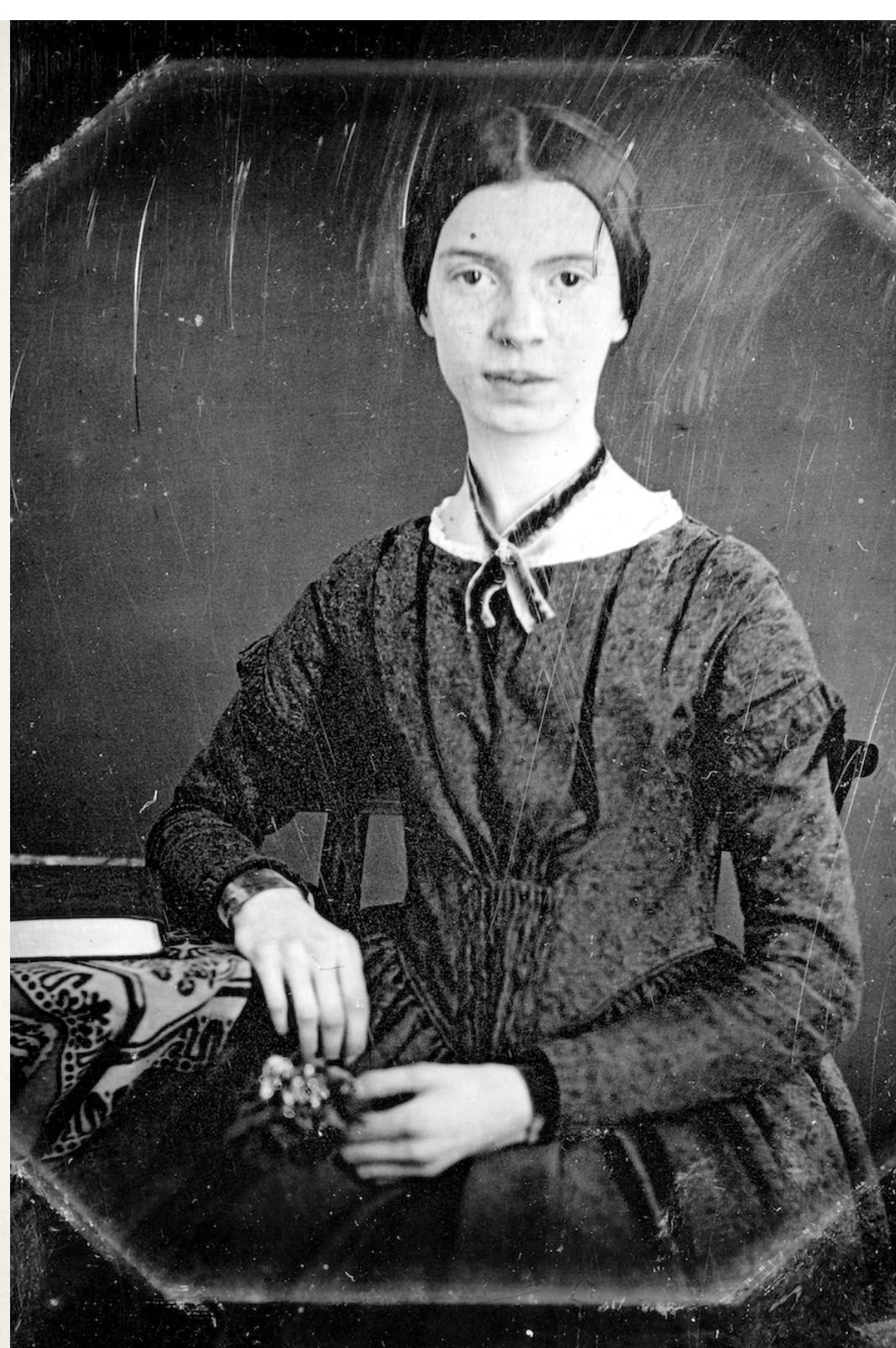
Emily Dickinson

1830–1886

# Dickinson

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This is the only absolutely verified image of Emily Dickinson, a teenager at the time, in 1847.



# Dickinson probably

This daguerrotype, shown for the first time in 2012, is almost certainly Dickinson (on the left) in her late 20s, about 1859; the woman on the right is Kathleen Scott Turner, a friend of Dickinson's.



# Apple Orders Emily Dickinson Series With Hailee Steinfeld Set to Star

By **JOE OTTERSON**



CREDIT: REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Apple has given a straight-to-series order to a half-hour series about 19th century poet Emily Dickinson, *Variety* has learned.

Hailee Steinfeld will star in the title role. The series is described as a comedic look into Dickinson's world, exploring the constraints of society, gender, and family from the perspective of a budding writer who doesn't fit in to her own time through her imaginative point of view.

# Life

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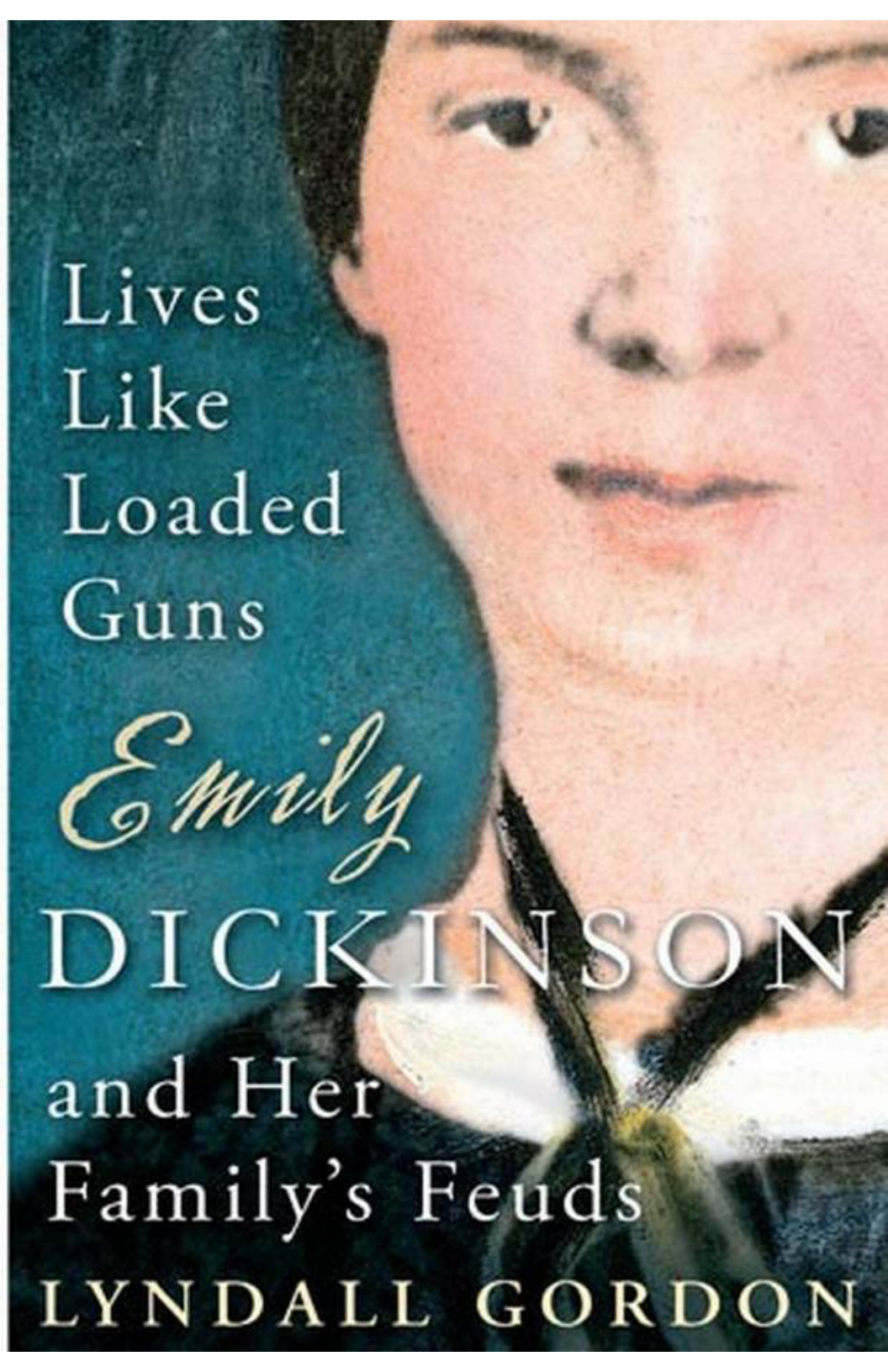
- ❖ Prominent, powerful father; quiet, chronically ill mother
- ❖ Reclusive from age 23 on (or maybe not so much?)
- ❖ Love life a mystery; religious views unclear
- ❖ Only 7 of her poems published during her life, not by her (?)
- ❖ Almost unknown at death, popular shortly after



# Life by Gordon

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- ❖ Argues Dickinson may have been epileptic (“I felt a Cleaving in my mind”)
- ❖ Brother Austin married to Sue; some claimed Dickinson was in love with Sue
- ❖ Austin carried on a long affair with Mabel Todd, meeting her while Emily worked upstairs
- ❖ Mabel and Austin edit and curate Emily’s poems, create myth of Dickinson



Lives  
Like  
Loaded  
Guns

*Emily*  
DICKINSON  
and Her  
Family's Feuds  
LYNDALL GORDON

# Crazy?

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- ❖ Dressed only in white
- ❖ Wrote 1,789 poems, sewed them up with needle and thread, then hid them in a cabinet
- ❖ Saw no one from outside the family after age of 23
- ❖ Wrote erotic letters to someone addressed only as “Master”



# Crazy?

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- ❖ Dressed only in white (**maybe — but not in either of the two photos!**)
- ❖ Wrote 1,789 poems, sewed them up with needle and thread, then hid them in a cabinet (**true**)
- ❖ Saw no one from outside the family after age of 23 (**sort of? Seeming less and less likely**)
- ❖ Wrote erotic letters to someone addressed only as “Master” (**yep**)





# Eccentric

15 April 1862

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Her letters appear eccentric at times, to say the least. Take, for example, her correspondence with Thomas Higginson; this is the first letter she ever wrote him:

*Mr Higginson,*

*Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?*

*The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see, distinctly—and I have none to ask—*

*Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude—*

*If I make the mistake—that you dared to tell me—would give me sincerer honor—toward you—*

*I enclose my name—asking you, if you please—Sir—to tell me what is true?*

*That you will not betray me—it is needless to ask—since Honor is its own pawn—*

On the general weirdness scale, that letter is comparable to, say, the lyrics of a Tori Amos or Fiona Apple song. But the next one...

# Eccentric

25 April 1862

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*You ask of my Companions — Hills — Sir — and the Sundown — and a Dog — large as myself, that my Father bought me — They are better than Beings — because they know — but do not tell — and the noise in the Pool, at Noon — excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister — My Mother does not care for thought — Father buys me many Books — but begs me not to read them — because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious — except me — and address an Eclipse, every morning — whom they call their “Father.” I would like to learn — Could you tell me how to grow — or is it unconveyed — like Melody — or Witchcraft?*

*You speak of Mr Whitman — I never read his Book — but was told that he was disgraceful —*

*I read Miss Prescott’s “Circumstance,” but it followed me, in the Dark — so I avoided her —*

*I could not weigh myself — Myself —*

*Is this — Sir — what you asked me to tell you?*

*Your friend,*

*E — Dickinson.*

# Reception

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- ❖ “Corrected” (punctuation, capitalization, titles, altered words) and *explained*
- ❖ Became famous as an eccentric recluse, spinster
- ❖ The Romantic artist should be mad, in touch with another world
- ❖ “Madwoman in the attic,” favorite of Romanticism

## The Emily Dickinson Reader

*An English-to-English Translation of  
Emily Dickinson's Complete Poems*



*by Paul Legault*

# Poetic Technique

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- ❖ The long dash (“em dash”)  
—
- ❖ Ballad meter
- ❖ Slant rhyme (and imperfect rhyme)
- ❖ No titles
- ❖ Telegraphic fragments (see dash above)
- ❖ The poetic “I” is unclear; who is speaking?
- ❖ Missing context or reference



# The em — dash

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The dash creates verse that is telegraphic, fragmentary, rhythmic, additive, free...

A sepal, petal, and a thorn  
Upon a common summer's morn —  
A flash of dew — a Bee or two —  
A breeze — a caper in the trees, —  
And I'm a Rose!



# Ballad meter

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A traditional *folk* rhythm (hence Romantic); alternating iambic tetrameter (four stresses) and iambic trimeter (three stresses). Sing-song effect. One line may break the metrical structure at times.

I felt a **Cleaving in my Mind** —

As if my **brain had split** —

I tried to **match it** — **Seam by Seam** —

But could not **make them fit**.



# Slant rhyme

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Used to refer to imperfect or partial rhyme, especially using the final consonant sounds. Often alternates perfect rhyme and slant rhyme.



# Slant rhyme

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# Slant rhyme

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Used to refer to imperfect or partial rhyme, especially using the final consonant sounds. Often alternates perfect rhyme and slant rhyme.

The Brain, within its Groove  
Runs evenly — and true —  
But let a Splinter swerve — } perfect  
'Twere easier for You.



# Slant rhyme

---

Used to refer to imperfect or partial rhyme, especially using the final consonant sounds. Often alternates perfect rhyme and slant rhyme.

The Brain, within its **Groove** }  
Runs evenly — and true — } slant  
But let a Splinter **swerve** — }  
'Twere easier for You.



# Slant rhyme

---

I'm "Wife" — I've finished **that** —  
That other **state** —  
I'm Czar — I'm "Woman" now —  
It's safer so —

How odd the Girl's life **looks**  
Behind this soft **Eclipse** —  
I think that Earth feels so  
To folks in Heaven — now —

This being comfort — **then**  
That other kind — was **pain** —  
But why compare?  
I'm "Wife"! Stop there!



# Titles/Poetic “I”

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Titles in a poem can function like soundtrack music in a film—an extra clue about how to interpret the poem, or simply context (“Ode on a Grecian Urn” would be somewhat baffling without the title). Dickinson *never* used titles.

Who is speaking in “I’m ‘Wife’”? Dickinson never married. She also didn’t write after she died, but many of poems are narrated from such a perspective. Who speaks in “Before I got my eye put out”? She never lost an eye.

What about Whitman’s “I”?



# Poetic Themes

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- ❖ Death(s); the small, vanishing self
- ❖ Thought
  - ❖ A “flaw in the brain”
  - ❖ Something can’t be said
  - ❖ Thought is fragile
  - ❖ Understanding is dangerous
- ❖ “I suppose there are depths in every Consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves — to which none can go with us —”
- ❖ God
- ❖ Mathematics and time
- ❖ Bees



Bees?

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# Bees Are Black

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Bees are Black, with Gilt<sup>o</sup> Surcingles\* —  
Buccaneers of Buzz.  
Ride abroad in ostentation  
And subsist on Fuzz.

<sup>o</sup> gilt, *plated in gold;*

\* surcingle, *the wide strap that goes around  
the belly of a horse*





**BUCCANEERS OF BUZZ**

HAYES



# Bees are awesome

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But more than merely awesome,  
they are a symbol of something  
eternal in a broken universe,  
a deep order that goes *beyond*

# Bees Are Black

---

Bees are Black, with Gilt<sup>o</sup> Surcingles\* —  
Buccaneers of Buzz.  
Ride abroad in ostentation  
And subsist on Fuzz.

Fuzz ordained — not Fuzz contingent —  
Marrows of the Hill.  
Jugs — a Universe's fracture  
Could not jar or spill.

<sup>o</sup> gilt, *plated in gold*;

\* surcingle, *a wide strap that goes around  
the belly of a horse*



# Loss of the Self

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Presentiment — is that long shadow —  
on the Lawn  
Indicative that Suns go down —  
The Notice to the startled Grass  
That Darkness — is about to pass —

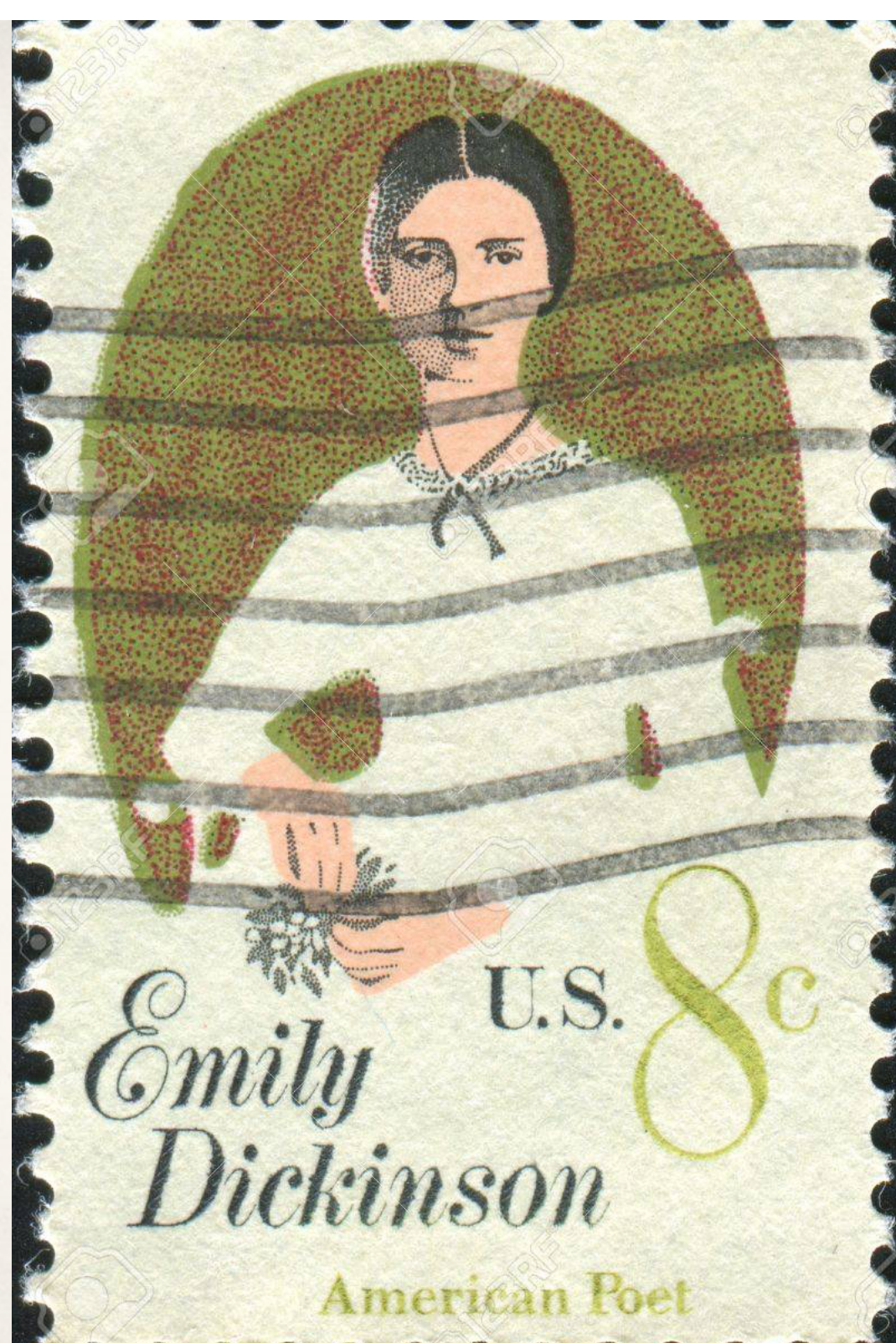


# Loss of the Self

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on the Lawn

Indicative that Suns go down —  
The Notice to the startled Grass  
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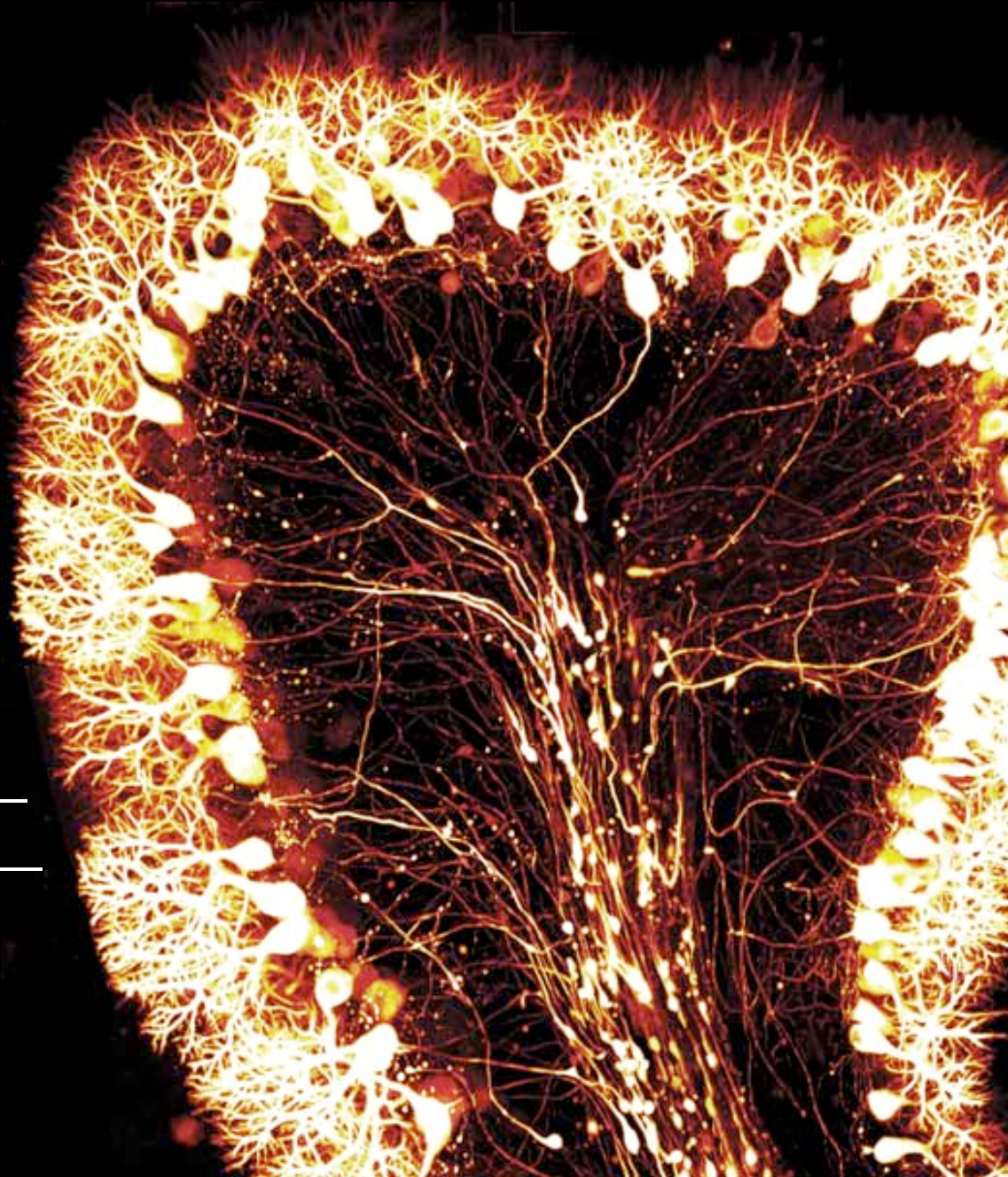


The Brain—is wider than the Sky—

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—  
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—  
The one the other will absorb—  
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

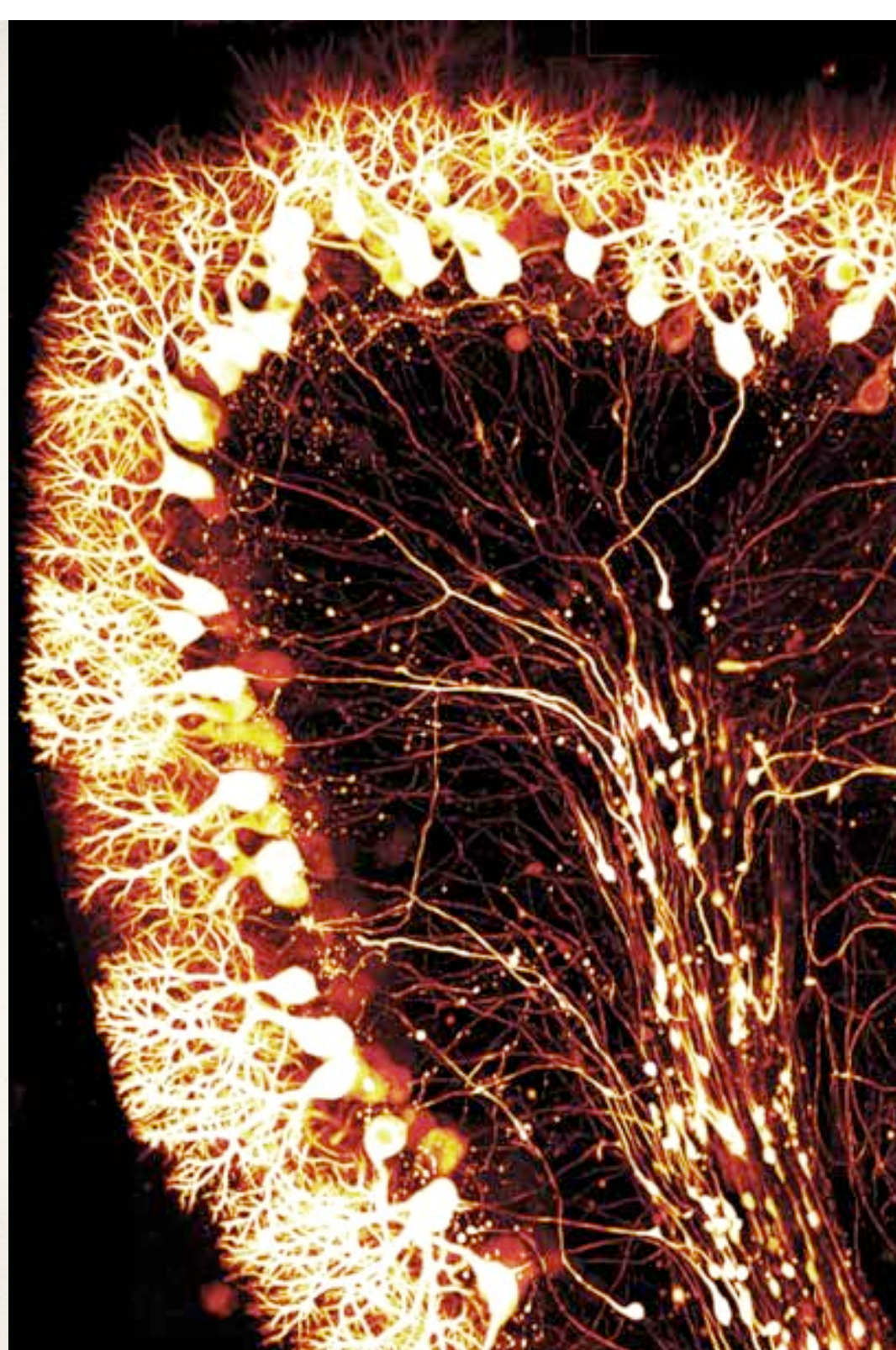
The Brain is just the weight of God—  
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—  
And they will differ—if they do—  
As Syllable from Sound—



# The Brain is Wider...

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- ❖ A clear (if paradoxical) observation: the small can encompass the large
  - ❖ The mind encompasses the sky
  - ❖ The mind encompasses the sea
  - ❖ Your mind encompasses *you*
  - ❖ Sponge absorbs a bucket of water
- ❖ Even the limit case—God—works
  - ❖ But “the Brain is just the weight of God”? God is a function of the mind? Contained within it?
  - ❖ Final image is unclear: what is the difference between *syllable* and *sound*?



# Poetic Groupings

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- ❖ Celebratory poems
  - ❖ “I taste a liquor never brewed”
  - ❖ “A sepal, petal and a thorn”
  - ❖ “To make a prairie”
- ❖ Death
  - ❖ “Because I could not stop for Death”
  - ❖ “Presentiment—is the long shadow”
  - ❖ “There’s a certain slant of light”
- ❖ Precarious thought
  - ❖ “The Brain, within its Groove”
  - ❖ “A Thought went up my mind”
  - ❖ “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind”
- ❖ Understanding is dangerous
  - ❖ “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—”
  - ❖ “Before I got my eye put out”
  - ❖ “I felt a Funeral in my Brain”



# A Clock stopped

A Clock stopped —  
Not the Mantel's —  
Geneva's farthest skill  
Can't put the puppet bowing —  
That just now dangled still —

An awe came on the Trinket!  
The Figures hunched, with pain —  
Then quivered out of Decimals —  
Into Degreeless Noon —

It will not stir for Doctors —  
This Pendulum of snow —  
The Shopman importunes it —  
While cool — concernless No —

Nods from the Gilded pointers —  
Nods from the Seconds slim —  
Decades of Arrogance between  
The Dial life —  
And Him —



# A Clock stopped

- ❖ Old-fashioned cuckoo clock: a little man comes out to ring the bell; the mechanism breaks, and the figurine “dangles still”
- ❖ But the clock is also a human heart, now stopped in death
- ❖ The body is a mechanism, a “puppet” or “Trinket”
- ❖ Opposition between measurable time of life and infinite time of death



# A Clock stopped

- ❖ Mechanical time is related to work (the “Shopman”), submission (“hunched,” “bowing,” “nods”)
- ❖ Dickinson calls this the “dial life.” It is base-10 in the poem, not base-12: decimals, decades
- ❖ The arrival of death destroys the “dial life”; the trinket perceives the infinity of death (“an awe came on the trinket”); numbers themselves recoil from death (“figures hunched, in pain”)



# A Clock stopped

- ❖ Time of death is measureless, a “Degreeless Noon”
- ❖ Noon moves us beyond decimals ( $12 > 10$ ). (“quivered out of”)
- ❖ Noon is not precisely a time, but rather the zero hour from which we measure time (when a sundial casts no shadow)
- ❖ Noon is also a *refusal* of time, the mirroring of *No* (no one, none), “cool — concernless No”



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And Him —

# A Clock stopped

A Clock stopped —  
**Not** the Mantel's —  
Geneva's farthest skill  
**Can't** put the puppet bowing —  
That just **now** dangled still —

An awe came on the Trinket!  
The Figures hunched, with pain —  
Then quivered out of Decimals —  
Into Degreeless **Noon** —

It will **not** stir for Doctors —  
This Pendulum of **snow** —  
The Shopman importunes it —  
While cool — concernless **No** —

**Nods** from the Gilded pointers —  
**Nods** from the Seconds slim —  
Decades of Arrogance between  
The Dial life —  
And Him —

# A Clock stopped

- ❖ Pendulum of snow (the image makes concrete the “cool — concernless No”); would melt, disintegrate; it is a nothing
- ❖ Time is frozen, forever static, forever nothing
- ❖ Doctors and shopmen stymied by this form of time; the poet is not—her natural terrain lies beyond the dial life: time, death, infinity

