I held a Jewel in my fingers —
To an admiring Bog!

To tell one’s name — the livelong June —
How public — like a Frog —
How dreary — to be — Somebody!

Don’t tell! they’d advertise — you know!
Then there’s a pair of us!
Are you — Nobody — too?
I’m Nobody! Who are you?

And now, an Amethyst remembrance
Is all I own —
And winds were prosy —

The Dickinson Collection is not a static memorial, but the center of an active research community. Boston-area faculty use the Dickinson Collection regularly in teaching literary history and an electronic Poems and Letters is now in the planning stage. Harvard and Montague knew his alma mater would provide the proper environment to nurture the Emily Dickinson Collection. Mr. Montague, a distant cousin of the Dickinsons, purchased the collection from Alfred Hampson, who inherited it from Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet’s niece. The Emily Dickinson Collection came to Harvard’s Houghton Library in 1950, from a desk within sight of the Houghton Library. There is a large tree, a series of lower trees, an expanse of grass, and then a delicate door behind which reside the handwritten original drafts of the very poems I am often teaching, as if they were written this morning, in my small well-lit office. To begin with, the sensation of her consciousness there, her only actual “living” presence, her words on her pages, physically within sight, acts, for me, as a tonic moral compass regarding humility, a measuring rod regarding the rarity and mystery of genius, a crucial “proof” or physical reminder, in this age of the virtual, that the United States actually exists as a series of souls, each taking the natural and civic life of the place into its inwardness, and creating a culture which will be known through the ages of human species on this planet as “the American Soul.” Finally, in many ways most moving, those pages in their folders act as a reminder of what is always potentially going on in each and every small community of this strange nation, whether it be during its Civil War, or during its current terrible fears. There she is, I think, the voice known as Emily Dickinson who will speak to later peoples, if they are lucky enough to remove sand and silt, after the rivers have risen, and dig up a place once known as the Houghton Library, and find those pages I have held in my hands. Pages on which the handwriting—whether in pencil or ink—is so pale as to make one feel the degree to which “in-scription” was almost a betrayal to this woman who felt so deeply that “He exists, somewhere, in silence,” who would have perhaps preferred to leave no trace on the silence of the empty page, but was compelled, in order to communicate to Him and to us, to put down a stain of language by which to mark the human reality in relation to the passage of time and the end of time.

Watching Houghton’s Leslie Morris open those folders and hand me one of those pages, the very first time, was as heartbreakingly an event as I could have imagined; and yet it only grew in its magnitude as the presence of those pages settled as a constant into my everyday life—there to be hurried past to an appointment, there to be hurried past again to keep out of rain, or late for class, hearing the bell, holding the sense of them there at the very core of the heart of Harvard. And the pages themselves: sometimes slightly stained here and there by household chores, a touch of lard or oil, a stain from other kitchen work . . . For these pages, any woman artist will tell you, are often folded in such a way as to be carried about in one’s apron as one does those household chores for which one is accountable, all the while casting a glance outside at the light, holding the meaning or sensation of time, of mortality, of the end of day, hurrying against time both as a mortal soul and as a baker of goods in a wood oven.

When I watch people moving past Houghton, around the yard, on their cellphones, listening to music, meeting a person who might become a friend, shy, lost, exhilarated, awakening, I always watch them go down the walk, and when I see them turn in to the Houghton, and go up its stairs, I think, there they go, they shall see a page, and she shall sit at her desk again today, very still, lift her pen, and speak to the newest one to walk into her room. I see her looking up at them. I see them being received.”

Jorie Graham
Boylston Professor of Oratory and Rhetoric, Faculty of Arts and Sciences

“Jorie Graham on the Houghton Experience:
Encountering Emily Dickinson”

Each day I teach young poets, and scholars of poetry, from a desk within sight of the Houghton Library. There is a large tree, a series of lower trees, an expanse of grass, and then a delicate door behind which reside the handwritten original drafts of the very poems I am often teaching, as if they were written this morning, in my small well-lit office.

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