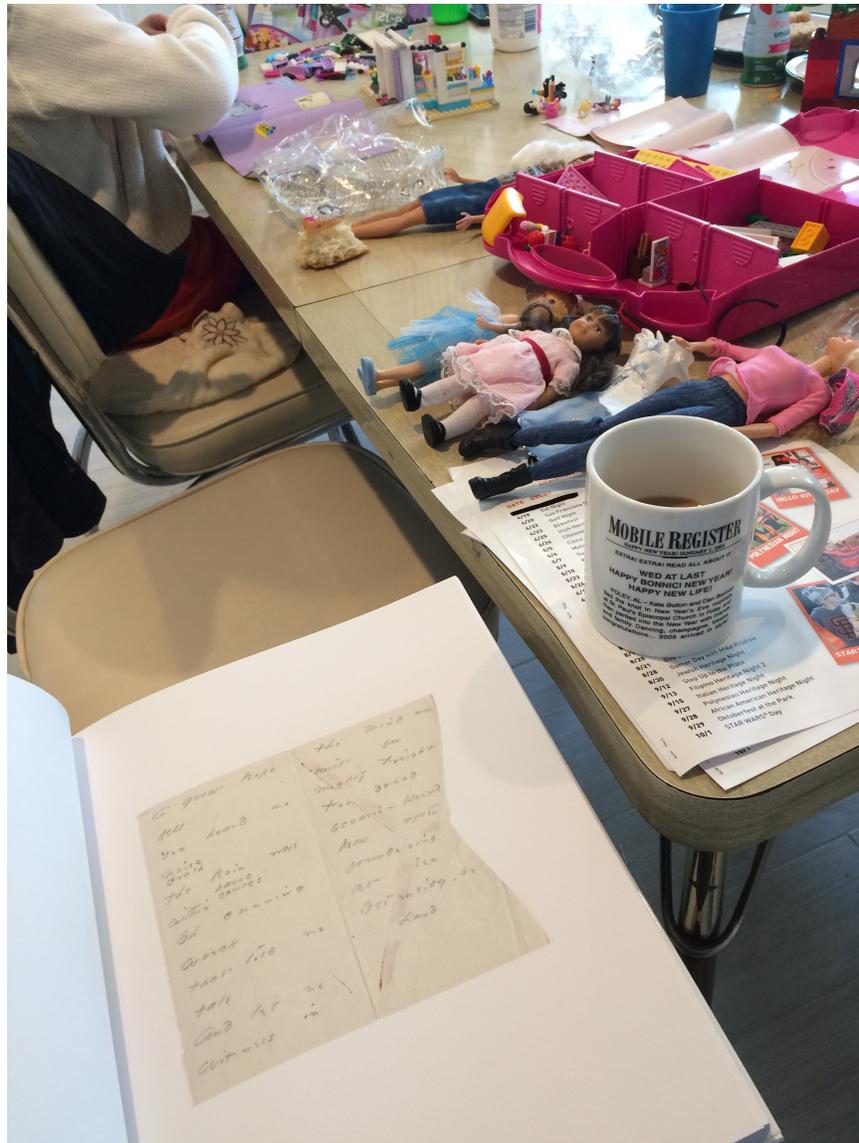


On Emily Dickinson's *Gorgeous Nothings*: Responses in Miniature

1. Poems and Toys, Poem as Toy: a Photograph



2. Poems and Toys, Poem as Toy: an Essay

On Christmas morning 2015, I took the photograph above of the first poem in *The Gorgeous Nothings*, an art book of facsimiles from Emily Dickinson's envelope writings.¹ My body sits outside the frame but is part of composition: I hold the book open to the manuscript facsimile, the first line of which reads, "A great Hope":

A great Hope	The mind was
fell	built for
You heard no	mighty Freight
noise	For dread
crash	
The Ruin was	occasion planned
within havoc	
damage	How often
Oh cunning	foundering
Wreck	at Sea
That told no	Ostensibly, on
Tale	Land
And let no Witness in	

The facsimile envelope (doubly photographed) upon which the line is written echoes in photographic silence the tan of the kitchen table and chairs, the white space around the facsimile the same as the white coffee mug and white sweatered arm across the table and the disheveled stack of papers and glare of light from the kitchen window facing the garden. For all its silence, it is a photograph dense with text—Lego instructions, yogurt container, coffee mug, sports schedule (such records of recurrent desire)—and layered with toys—plastic bricks meant to be assembled as an ice cream shop and four dolls

¹ *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*. Edited by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin. New Directions, 2013.

foregrounded on their backs in various periods of dress. Miniaturized forms Giorgio Agamben would call “the cipher[s] of history” (81).

My husband and children gave me the book when we were celebrating my mother-in-law’s last Christmas. Already she could not speak. She died of complications from ALS the week before the following Easter, preparations for her funeral rushed because no extra masses could be said during Holy Week.

In R.W. Franklin’s reading edition, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, “A great Hope fell” is regularized as No. 1187. On the printed page it falls neatly into two stanzas:

A great Hope fell
You heard no noise
The Ruin was within
Oh cunning Wreck
That told no Tale
And let no Witness in

The mind was built for mighty Freight
For dread occasion planned
How often foundering at sea
Ostensibly, on Land.

There is no impediment to the smoothness of the line—indeed, not even punctuation pauses one until the last—all breath managed at the level of phrase, which is mostly equivalent and equidistant to the level of the line.

Although I had the reading edition, I read this particular poem first in envelope form contained in a book received in the home of a woman who struggled to breathe. Franklin’s clean poem is not land, not sea, but the black surface of well-water; the

envelope is a conversation or conversion or the converse. The envelope at the morning, not yet mourning, table is the “havoc” drowned in the printed form.

I understand, of course, the constraining expectations of real or assumed meter. I understand, of course, the impulse to resolution as intention or as the breakdown of matter. I understand misunderstanding resolution for salvation.

Omitted: crash, havoc, damage.

Revised: the line.

No longer: “The mind was”—a line that breaks itself open as it breaks the reading heart. “The mind was”—former being and we leap the ditch, as Mary Oliver explains, to “built for.” “Built for” as a contained—or if not contained at least reckoned—line maintains the possibility of questioning.

Skip a line and “built for” becomes the inverse of “for dread”—or “for dread” makes an equally plausible answer to the question of the mind’s construction, the dead dark of “mighty Freight.”

Can hope as an act of desire recur—wave-like, oceanic—once fallen? Can the poem as book brought to the table not be a document or a replicated antique, but a toy through which we, remade in the early light of Christmas morning, gather to play with history?² That is to say, can it hide? Can it pretend?

² See Agamben’s “Infancy and History,” on the role of the toy as playing with history.

3. **Ars Moriendi**³

What is the meaning of a good death and does it count if near the time of such dread occasion you ask to go to the hospital? What if you cannot say hospital and must write the word and is the word alone enough or must it be accompanied by a noiseless grammatical plea? Or what if the hand muscles lie down together like old laces, and you must gesture or press the button on the voice machine to prompt another wording of place and all this only means the answer must be *no* because the hospital is where you go to live and it's too late for that. Here, the answer becomes more morphine. The hospice nurse says give more to keep you from thinking you are choking or drowning, which makes you need to lean against someone. When you foundered and I held you, I promised to take care of your son and your grandchildren, and I knew that this was a promise made for me.

³ Includes text from "A great Hope," *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 16-17.

4. Cast⁴

You. Formed as language in the writing mind means mostly Maureen and sometimes the poet. Means no longer here, means bounded by dates, means new or other ways of making presence from memory. Can address sustain its object, or is the object, as Glory, overtakeless?

Me. [Here the cursor waits. It blinks. Remains undefined.]

Husband. Refers to your child who is no longer but always will be. Yours and child, that is. Title imbued with weight, with freight, this companion in all restrictions, failures, and longings.

Children. Mine. Yours. Somewhere in between or both or neither. Infancy as transcendental opening of “the space of history,” these “unstable signifiers” closer to ghosts.⁵

Infant. Possible addition, or not. Also Agamben’s boundary between the human and the linguistic, so defined as experience, and at the time of this list the plastic babies with which the den is adorned. I first wrote “strewn.”

⁴ Includes text from *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 38-39, 66-67.

⁵ Agamben 58, 60, 93.

When does adoration become adornment become litter become glitter
become gone?

Book. The more urgent question: Is a photograph of writing rendered in language
or does it render language image? And by this I mean the book came
wrapped in green with a pale gold bow. The failure of hope on cut paper
rendered photograph rendered gift rendered permanent like stone. Once
you were a teacher, but you'd long ago stopped being able to squeeze a
pair of scissors. The more recent past: you could not read to your students.
Surely only a strain in the voice. Surely only.

Poem. AKA: words hand-written and bound by the envelope's edge.
AKA: memorial. AKA: toy. AKA: crib of the spectral infant. Each word
written, as Agamben says of the Nativity scene reconfigured, "a whole in
itself . . . welded into a single structure" through participation in the
imagined event. Proof that the absence of the witch does not invalidate the
spell.

5. Ars Moriendi⁶

My daughters were born in hospitals. The second time, I was assured I would not be strapped to the bed with fetal monitors, watching the light only of that inhospitable pall. That I could move around, sit down, even shower. How cordial. The first time my mother was there. The touch of her hand on my calf as if beckoning made me unable to concentrate. You came the next day and stayed some number of days less than a week because on day eight of my first daughter's life your first son died, and when you called to tell your second son, the one who was with me, he fell where he stood standing by the bed and could only say, Oh God, and I held the baby who was a jaundiced, breakable mystery. In my memory of the moment I cannot picture holding a child, only something so light it could float upward. What I do remember is being beside the bed, trying to kneel down to your son while I held your granddaughter. My episiotomy hadn't healed and I must have felt that as I squatted. The unbreaking, breaking body, how pompless no life can pass away.

⁶ Includes text from *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 88-89.

6. Letter, Unaddressed⁷

You've said we shall not harm her magic pace, but how? How do we do no harm? Such a charged directive at which we daily fail.

In the trace of said failings, how do we keep hope small—alive, but closer further simply merely finer? I like the last—granular. Keeping awe on the scale of the speck. Not planet, but astral dust, not flower but pollen grain.

Gorgeous these Lucretian atoms incapable of love or otherwise, only able to compose.

Is this how the breach is filled? What was once held I hold in other form—fondled fire swerving to the embers of another years-past uncovering.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls pleasure perfect—that is to say, “within each now something whole and complete.” Simultaneity of alternatives is a form of pleasure outside of movement and thus reconceiving time. This is the making, the made-ness of your poems.

Absence, or the possibility thereof, is agony in the body. In the poem, both are pleasure. Pleasure down to the smallest particle. Pleasure even now.

⁷ Includes text from *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 38-39, 66-67, 160-161.

7. Critical Apparatus

The Gorgeous Nothings was a gift—the site of pleasure in an otherwise grievous time because we were preparing for my mother-in-law’s dying, preparation for which I felt wholly unequipped, not only as an individual mourning human, but as someone capable of helping my young children and my husband with this passage. The book allowed for a way into Dickinson’s poetry not separate from but part of the messiness of lived experience. At the same time, it provided a critical frame for thinking about the “poem”—in particular, the spectral nature of hand-writing, the mediation of photography, and most importantly, the simultaneity and multiplicity of words that seem to be alternatives co-existing in the space of a writing. It was this simultaneity/multiplicity that helped break the spell of linear finality for me, and in breaking that spell, recast the poem as necessarily including a multiplicity of simultaneous “alternatives” so that it might expose its unbounded-boundedness, its potential and instability, the myth of fixity in composition.

Agamben’s writing on the nativity crib, following his work connecting children to ghosts and funeral games to rites, opened into a way of re-conceiving the spectral. His thinking about pleasure acted as a further lens through which to enter poetic interpretation more fully. Agamben argues that pleasure is “an experience so essential to human beings” that it is pleasure upon which a new concept of time can be founded, for pleasure and “quantified time” do not correspond:

This does not mean that pleasure has its place in eternity. The Western experience of time is split between eternity and continuous linear time. The dividing point through which the two relate is the instant as a discrete,

elusive point. Against this conception, which dooms any attempt to master time, there must be opposed one whereby the site of pleasure, as man's primary dimension, is neither precise, continuous time nor eternity, but history True historical materialism does not pursue an empty mirage of continuous progress along infinite linear time, but is ready at any moment to stop time, because it holds the memory that mans' original home is pleasure" (114-15).

Holding this in mind, or in memory, I found myself accessing the poem as a site of pleasure—if not in time, then interrupting or re-encoding time so that the pleasure of the poem becomes a memorialized time-stop, a chiasmus against which linearity cannot proceed in its stream unto death (and the poem as likewise not moving into a final eternal state). Here, pleasure bears the weight in the form of a book removed from an opened box and occasioned by celebration of recurrent, unfulfilled messianic time, which is to say a book of a woman's writings once and always laid upon the toy-strewn table opposite the room wherein stood the scene of miniature nativity. There, we looked and talked and read and played—and we still do.

8. *Ars Moriendi*⁸

Seven months after you called to tell us your son had died, when we were traveling to come see you with the baby and I put her on the bed, she rolled off, hit the ground, and had to be taken to the hospital for a CT scan. Was it the same bed? She neither died nor was injured from the fall; she fell from the other side of the bed. I think it was the new bed, the king-sized bed in the same room. When you were dying you bought a new bed that stayed until the very last when a hospital bed became necessary. The new bed elevated your upper body so you could roll yourself out during the night. Beside you on the new bed the partner you loved could lie with you so that your body was not a body alone on that specific pillow. Your grandchildren liked the new bed too, ushering you up by remote, turning your rest to play, your surface to a toy. In a final photograph you wear a bipap mask and the red flannel nightgown from Christmas, with four children flitting around you, and though the picture does not tell this the bed would have been lifting you, laying you back down, lifting you up again, funeral games before the rites. All of you together, rising.

⁸ Includes text from *The Gorgeous Nothings*, 80-81.