

EMILY DICKINSON ENTERS INTO HEAVEN

a short play by David Ives

emilydickinsonentersheaven.doc
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Contact:
Olivier Sultan
Creative Artists Agency
(212) 277-9000

The characters:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 52
 SAPPHO, maybe 40
 EMILY DICKINSON, a girlish 55

The setting:

Mostly bare stage, with one armchair up left of center and, at right, a drinks cart with some golden chalices and a crystal decanter that looks empty. Celestial light. We're on a cloud.

(Lights up on SHAKESPEARE in the armchair reading a newspaper while sipping from a golden chalice. He's in a doublet and ruff and tights, with a leather purse on his belt. Whistling "Greensleeves," maybe. The newspaper he's reading has no print.)

SHAKESPEARE

(sitting up, noticing something in the paper)

Well, I'll be damned. Gone already...?

(SAPPHO ENTERS in sandals and a robe of the 8th century BC. Maybe the robe is orange and black, like a Greek vase. She's strumming a lyre that has no strings.)

SAPPHO

(intoning with great intensity)

Poikilohthron ahthanaht Aphrohdita, pai Dios dohlohplokeh...!

SHAKESPEARE

Sappho!

SAPPHO

...leesohmai seh...!

SHAKESPEARE

Sappho!

SAPPHO

Leesohmai SEHHHHH...!

SHAKESPEARE

SAPPHO!

SAPPHO

(Aegean accent)

Ah. Excuse me, Willy. I do not see you in my lyrical transport.

SHAKESPEARE

Have you got a sec?

SAPPHO

I? All eternity.

SHAKESPEARE

Indeed. Well, let me just fold this up... There having been a few complaints about how I leave it... Unfolded, apparently...

(Can't fold the newspaper.)

Damn damn damn... Oh, fie. The hell with it.

(Tosses the paper onto the chair unfolded.)

SAPPHO

You are reading the culture pages? From Down There?

SHAKESPEARE

No, the business pages, actually. I like to follow the market. Just a, you know, small habit. Though I have to say there *was* a piece about me today, just a little thing, a few thousand words. I circled it, in case anyone cared to read it.

SAPPHO

Congratulations.

SHAKESPEARE

Boring stuff. Academic. About *Hamlet*, of course, yawn yawn yawn. Hail *the Bard*, etcetera.

SAPPHO

You are tired of such attention?

SHAKESPEARE

I certainly am tired of hearing about that damn play. On which I made all of ten shillings and sixpence. Can you imagine the accrued royalties on that?

SAPPHO

Life is so hard. For the immortal bard.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, very good. Funny. Rhyming and everything.

SAPPHO

On the other hand, what would you do with royalties up here?

SHAKESPEARE

True, true. It's just, you know...

SAPPHO

The idea.

SHAKESPEARE

The idea. I mean, Sophocles is always harping on about the same thing.

SAPPHO

Yes, I just see him now.

SHAKESPEARE

He mentioned *Antigone*, no doubt. Oh, yes, let's hear about that again. The tremendous hit it was in Athens. Arrogant prick.

SAPPHO

Antigone is good play.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, it's a great idea! But can we talk about the *middle*? Talk talk talk, nature of man. *The scalpel, please!*

SAPPHO

Oh, yes? Your *Hamlet* is six hours long.

SHAKESPEARE

Only in the director's cut.

SAPPHO

Who was the director?

SHAKESPEARE

I was. I did the show in two but that version got lost somehow.

SAPPHO

Alas.

SHAKESPEARE

Just mentioning. Just mentioning.

(The crystal bottle, offering:)

Care for some nectar?

SAPPHO

It feels a bit early. Is it early?

SHAKESPEARE

(pouring himself a chalice-full)

Later than you think. As always. But it's always after five Up Here, thank God. Funny thing is, heavenly nectar, right? Yet the stuff makes you pee like a house on fire.

SAPPHO

Yes. And to leave the toilet seat up, apparently.

SHAKESPEARE

Now we've been over that sufficiently, I think. But how are you, Saff? Writing something new?

SAPPHO

Oh, you know. Just fiddling.

SHAKESPEARE

Liar.

(Points to her instrument, then to her:)

Lyre, liar, you see?

SAPPHO

And people tell me you wrote comedies. But what of you, Willy? Are you onto something new?

SHAKESPEARE

You mean writing? Not much point up here. No money in it, certainly. Though I've had a few ideas, a few ideas.

SAPPHO

Did you steal these ideas?

SHAKESPEARE

Of course I did! You know me. I'm a thief, I'm a whore! Good God, I stole *Hamlet* from *myself*.

SAPPHO

If only it were better play.

SHAKESPEARE

I think it's good enough. Some fine passages here and there. The newspaper liked it today.

SAPPHO

Willy. *I was being ironic.*

SHAKESPEARE

You are such a bitch. Listen, I'm glad to be out of all that mess. Theatre. Eugh. I mean, lawsuits, egotistical collaborators. Friends begging for comps. Though I wouldn't mind a fresh idea, if only for something to do.

SAPPHO

I miss the mess, myself. The big mess.

SHAKESPEARE

What, you mean earth?

SAPPHO

Yes, I mean earth. I mean life! I mean dirt, I mean spit, I mean love! Tragic horrible wonderful love! You do not miss this?

SHAKESPEARE

Rather a filthy business, isn't it? Love?

SAPPHO

Yes, it is filthy! If you are *lucky*!

SHAKESPEARE

I mean, orifices, and...everything...

SAPPHO

But, O, the infatuations, the daily torture, the inner writhing, the outer writhing, the writhings in the dark in bed, the licking the perfumes and the oils and the sweat from your lover's body, the sweat that tastes of the wine-dark sea! And then writing songs about your lover. Slaughtering the little fool in immortal verse for leaving you. For leaving ME! Sappho!

(Sudden intensity, intoning:)

Dehyoor mek Krehtahss ehpi tonda nowohn...!

SHAKESPEARE

(underneath her chant)

Sappho. Sappho. Thank you. Wonderful.

SAPPHO

Come to me, Aphrodite! Take me back in your winged boat! Give me Lesbos! Give me nights on the beach singing my songs to a thousand admirers! Give me roasted lamb and spanakopita and baklava!

SHAKESPEARE

Not to mention give you back all your lesbians.

SAPPHO

Ah. You are making joke? You are implying something?

SHAKESPEARE

No, not at all, I was just... Your fellow *Lesbians*, they lived on *Lesbos*, nothing wrong with that.

SAPPHO

I liked men *and* women. You should understand that. Being a *lesbian* yourself.

(*Imitating him:*)

“Oh, the Earl of Essex! Oh, the leg on Southampton! And was Ben Jonson *dreamy*...?”

SHAKESPEARE

Ben Jonson was a *pig*. A rude and hairy pig. Wonderful biceps, though. These fantastic shoulders... In any case, have you heard? Dickinson’s on her way up.

SAPPHO

Emily? No. Not already.

SHAKESPEARE

It’s 1886.

SAPPHO

NO!

SHAKESPEARE

(*showing newspaper*)

Says so right there.

SAPPHO

Impossible. Last I heard it was 1825 and Johnny Keats arriving.

SHAKESPEARE

(*shows her a newspaper item*)

There she is.

SAPPHO

My my my, how the time passes. But good! She deserves to join us. The great Emily.

SHAKESPEARE

Mmmm. Yes. Absolutely. Marvelous poet.

SAPPHO

You do not agree with me.

SHAKESPEARE

Listen. No one, *no one* is more deserving of immortality than Miss Dickinson. None that I can think of at the moment.

SAPPHO

You condescending bastard.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm not condescending! I love her poetry. I mean, the words, the weirdness, the American inventiveness, all that perfect New England purity. It's the damn dashes that put me off.

SAPPHO

The dashes...

SHAKESPEARE

You know she puts these funny little dashes all over the place? Middle of lines, ends of lines, between words...

SAPPHO

I know Emily's dashes. I like the dashes.

SHAKESPEARE

Fine. Maybe you can explain the dashes.

SAPPHO

Yes, I will explain the dashes: they are *genius*. How is that.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, *genius*. Well. "Genius." That explains it. Now I understand.

SAPPHO

You are such a prick. Maybe the dashes were where she stopped writing to take a breath, or to find a word, maybe the dashes are ways to make you slow up, to stop and listen to the poem. I DON'T KNOW. I do not explain the dashes, the same way I do not try to explain the way some people do not fold the newspaper correctly or *leave the toilet seat UP*.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh not again. I thought that was all behind us.

(EMILY DICKINSON ENTERS, a petite woman in a white dress carrying a small bouquet.)

SAPPHO

A gaping toilet seat was behind *me* just *THIS MORNING*, thank you.

SHAKESPEARE

Must we go over this again...?

SAPPHO

With pee-pee around the edges of the bowl?

SHAKESPEARE

Point taken, point taken. Thank you!

EMILY

Excuse me...

SAPPHO

They have invented toilets now. Please. *Learn to use them.*

SHAKESPEARE

I promise, I swear to be more careful in future.

EMILY

Excuse me...

SHAKESPEARE

(To EMILY)

Just one second.

(To SAPPHO:)

Maybe I'll make myself a note about it with about fifty dashes all over it. "Dear – dash – Will. Don't forget – dash – to leave – dash – the toilet seat down for the – dash – ladies. Must dash now. Sincerely, dash, Will."

SAPPHO

And people say you wrote comedies. HA. HA. HA.

SHAKESPEARE

Can we at least get off of toilets? We were talking about inexplicable and ungrammatical, dashes.

EMILY

I'm sorry...

SAPPHO

You know what those dashes are? They are the marks of *originality*.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, originality. Always fine for the desperate.

EMILY

Excuse me.

SHAKESPEARE

I wasn't original, I *stole*.

SAPPHO

Ah, this again.

EMILY

I'm just a bit lost...

SHAKESPEARE

Will you give us just one second?

SAPPHO

Think about it. Emily Dickinson is living with a sister in, someplace, *Amherst Massawhatsits*.

EMILY

Chusetts.

SAPPHO

Thank you. Which is nowhere.

EMILY

I wouldn't say nowhere.

SAPPHO

She is completely unschooled.

EMILY

Actually, I went to Mount Holyoke for a year.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm sorry, *do you mind?* We're in the middle of something.

SAPPHO

There she is, living with her provincial family, and she begins to write poems! In secret! One thousand seven hundred eighty-nine poems, to be exact.

EMILY

Was it that many?

SAPPHO

Yes! All this in Amherst Massawhatsits, for God's sake!

EMILY

Chusetts.

SHAKESPEARE

Well, what else could she do but scribble. I mean, not much of a love life.

SAPPHO

(forestalling whatever EMILY is about to say)

You say love life, you mean sex life.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, I'm talking about the old in-out-in-out. You know what that is.

SAPPHO

I know what that is for *men*.

SHAKESPEARE

Well pardon me for being *male*.

EMILY

I'm sorry...

SAPPHO

Yes. *Men*, who are like what you say about the month of March. *In like a lion, out like a lamb*.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, please. How long have you been saving that one up?

SAPPHO

We know about Emily's love life. She loved eternity.

SHAKESPEARE

She loved capital-D *Death* is more like it. I mean, yes, of course write your little poems but my *God* it's all death, death, death. Or rather death – *dash* – death.

SAPPHO

You say this? After *King Lear* and the Scottish play?

SHAKESPEARE

It was *entertainment*. Violence was good box office. It didn't *mean* anything.

SAPPHO

Eugh!

(To EMILY:)

What of you, do you like Emily Dickinson's poetry?

EMILY

Well, I don't know.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, don't just ask *her*. Take a poll! Canvass the heavens, please! Why is her opinion any better than mine, I who have certainly, thank you, been called a genius? And where is the bitch, by the way? Why isn't Emily showing her face, so we can ask her in person?

(To EMILY:)

Have *you* seen Emily Dickinson? Oh, EMILY!!! EMILYYYYY...!!!

EMILY
I'm Emily Dickinson.

SHAKESPEARE
I'm sorry?

EMILY
I'm Emily.

SAPPHO
And people say he wrote comedies. EMILY DICKINSON!
(Embraces EMILY.)
Welcome! How wonderful to meet you! Oh, you look so sweet. How was the journey?

EMILY
The journey to here? Oh. Well. Surprising, I guess you'd say. Not what I expected.

SAPPHO
Exactly what they all say!

SHAKESPEARE
And you say she's original? Hello, Emily, I'm Will.

EMILY
No. Wait. Wait. You're...you're *Will*?

SHAKESPEARE
I blush to say it. Yes, I am.

EMILY
Not Will. Not *the*...?

SHAKESPEARE
(false modesty)
Yes. *The* Will.

EMILY
Not William...?

SHAKESPEARE
Yes. In the flesh, or nearly flesh.

EMILY
William Cooper? I love your poetry! Lordie! Isn't this something. I can quote whole reams of your work!

SHAKESPEARE

Excuse me...

EMILY

Wait.

(With quiet rapture:)

“Not rural sights alone, but rural sounds / Exhilarate the spirit...”

SHAKESPEARE

Excuse me.

EMILY

Sorry?

SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare. William. Shakespeare.

EMILY

Oh. I’m so sorry. William Shakespeare! Well. Goodness. Actually William Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE

Himself.

EMILY

Isn’t that the end. I wish Vinnie were here.

SHAKESPEARE

Vinnie, Vinnie...

EMILY

My sister Lavinia. Oh, she’s a great admirer of yours. And my brother Austin, he loves your work, too. Parts of it.

SHAKESPEARE

How very nice of him. Any parts in particular?

EMILY

Well, *Hamlet*. Parts of that.

SAPPHO

(before Emily gets in any deeper...)

In any case. Welcome to immortality, Emily. I am Sappho.

EMILY

Sappho. Oh my Lord. Oh my Lord. SAPPHO? THE Sappho?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes. Sappho *Cooper*. Poet-ess.

EMILY

I can't believe this! Wait a moment, wait a moment. "Poikilohthron ahthanaht Aphrohdita, pai
Dia dohlohplokeh...!"

SAPPHO

(correcting her)
Dohlohplokeh...!

EMILY

"*Dohlohplokeh...*!" Sorry. So gorgeous! Lordie.

SHAKESPEARE

Female solidarity. In Greek, no less. A wonderful thing. While I, of course, had small Latin and less Greek.

EMILY

Ben Jonson said that about you, didn't he.

SHAKESPEARE

Rank jealousy, of course. "The green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds upon!"

EMILY

Is that, I'm sorry, is that from one of yours?

SAPPHO

Emily...

SHAKESPEARE

Is that from *one of MINE*?

EMILY

I'm sorry, I just...

SHAKESPEARE

I guess you were reading *William Cooper* that day. YES, IT'S FROM ONE OF MINE.

EMILY

I'm sorry I didn't recognize it. Is it *Hamlet*? Or...?

SAPPHO

Emily...

SHAKESPEARE

Othello. I could cite you act and scene, but would it really matter?

EMILY

I'm very sorry. My father didn't read you to us much. Pope and Dryden and some of Coleridge, of course. And Ben Jonson, needless to say. I love Ben Jonson.

SAPPHO

(under the end of that, warning)

Emily. Emily.

EMILY

(continuing, to SHAKESPEARE)

Do you...not care for Ben Jonson's work?

SHAKESPEARE

I think I'm going to finish the paper. If you ladies will excuse me.

(SHAKESPEARE sits and loudly takes up the newspaper.)

SAPPHO

(confidentially, to EMILY)

Do not sit in this chair, by the way.

EMILY

Is it his?

SAPPHO

So he says. It is nobody's really.

EMILY

My father was the same way. God rest his soul.

SHAKESPEARE

(the newspaper)

Emily, you're mentioned in here, by the way. Small obit, page 56. Daughter of, loving sister of, etcetera. Nothing about *poetry*, unfortunately.

EMILY

I hope I didn't offend him.

SAPPHO

He is always like this. Eternally, you might say.

EMILY

Eternally. Yes. Yes! I'd almost forgotten. This is Eternity...! This is Death! Capital-D...

SHAKESPEARE

Dash.

EMILY

...Death! Well, isn't this wonderful. Heaven. Actual heaven.

SAPPHO

Yes. Our own little town.

EMILY

How *overwhelming*. No roads, no paths, just...heaven. Quite a lot of cloud, isn't it. Sorry to have interrupted you. I suppose everyone's probably a little lost at first. In Eternity.

SHAKESPEARE

Those who make it here.

SAPPHO

Technically, Emily, this is not Eternity, this is *Immortality*.

EMILY

Oh, I'm sorry.

SAPPHO

Which is a part of Eternity, or something. I do not understand the exact details, the cosmology.

SHAKESPEARE

Is it important, really? *Since we're here?*

EMILY

Well, good, maybe you can help orient me. Here in – Immortality.

SAPPHO

There is not so much to know. It goes that way and that way and that way and that way all the way around and then there is an outer ring, a sort of a suburb...

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, you'll find *Cooper* there. In the outer ring. Still as *rural* as ever, old Coop.

SAPPHO

Shut. Up! Anyway, those in that ring are the semi-immortals, and then beyond them the hemi-semi-immortals, then hemi-semi-demi-immortals, etcetera.

EMILY

What's beyond that?

SAPPHO

Well, I don't know. Nothing, really, as far as I know.

EMILY

How breathtaking. Sheer nothingness.

SHAKESPEARE

(miming a Wiley-Coyote-ish drop-off)

Very sheer.

EMILY

It certainly is bright up here.

SAPPHO

Yes. Endless and unending day.

EMILY

So. Well. Lordie, what does one do here? In unending day?

SAPPHO

Do...? What do we do? Willy, what do we do?

SHAKESPEARE

We bask.

EMILY

I'm sorry?

SHAKESPEARE

We *bask*. I mean, it is heaven. Why not?

EMILY

But what I mean is, there's no gardening, or baking. Or church or singing hymns or anything.

SHAKESPEARE

Gardening or baking?! Or sewing?! Is that too precious?

EMILY

It's just...what I did...

SHAKESPEARE

You're telling me, sweetheart.

EMILY

Do you ever miss things like that? Up Here?

SAPPHO

I was just saying to Willy. O, for the filthy mess of it all! The infatuations, the inner writhing, the outer writhing, the writhings in the dark in bed, the licking the sweat from your lover's body!

EMILY

Yes. Oh, yes.

SAPPHO

The sweat that tastes of the wine-dark sea.

EMILY

Mmm-hmmm.

SHAKESPEARE

You're embarrassing the girl, Saff.

EMILY

Oh, no. I'm not embarrassed. It's lovely. So vivid.

SAPPHO

Perhaps after your journey you would care for some nectar?

EMILY

Nectar. *No*. Real nectar?

SAPPHO

Well. As real as it can be – Up Here.

SHAKESPEARE

It'll still make you pee like the Nile in spring.

SAPPHO

Willy...

SHAKESPEARE

Spirits for spirits, I like to say. Cheers, ladies.

SAPPHO

So Emily, would you like to try?

EMILY

Oh, no thank you. Maybe later. *Is there a later here?*

SAPPHO

More or less. We know it is later when someone joins us. You, for example.

EMILY

Oh, my.

SAPPHO

Dear girl. What's the matter?

EMILY

Nothing. I just, I spent so much of my life thinking about it. About capital-D Death...

SHAKESPEARE

(to SAPPHO)

Did I say?

EMILY

Worrying and wondering and wishing for it. Fear it. Death and immortality. Regular immortality, I mean. The plain kind, the old-fashioned kind after capital-D Death. The kind they talk about at church. Of course, I was always part of it, I was always *in* Eternity. I mean, everyone always is, aren't they. Just by being born, just by *being* you're *in* the universe, just tending my hollyhocks and my irises I was in the Great Thing. It was just called Amherst. I was a part of infinity just baking my bread. My bread was famous around Amherst.

SHAKESPEARE

(muttering)

Good God...

EMILY

And that bread was *infinite bread*, when you think about it! That was heaven already, just doing that, just hearing the robins and the blue jays and the bees come to life in the morning. It's not as if when you die, you go somewhere else. Well, obviously you do. You go into a continuation of eternity, the eternity without earth and robins and blue jays and bees. And this is it right here. The immortality everyone talks about so much. This. *This*. How extraordinary.

SAPPHO

Emily, I think we are going to be wonderful friends.

EMILY

Could we? Yes. I hope so. Thank you. But first – Lordie, I can't wait to see everyone!

SAPPHO

See everyone...?

EMILY

My father, he went in '74, my mother, she went in '82. So many people! Mr. Humphrey, Miss Jenkins, poor Mr. Bowles.

SAPPHO

Ah, yes. Well...

EMILY

Where would they be? Are they nearby?

SAPPHO

Emily, I am so sorry to tell you, they are not here, all those people.

EMILY

Not here?

SAPPHO

You are here, not they.

EMILY

You don't mean they went to...?

SAPPHO

No no no, not at all!

EMILY

Do they go *somewhere*?

SAPPHO

Not really, no. You see, Emily, this is for us. Immortality. It is for the Immortals.

EMILY

But you mean – all this? It's not for – Vinnie, or my father, my brother Austin, my cousins?

SAPPHO

They will certainly be remembered Down There as part of your family. But immortal? No.

EMILY

But that's awful. It's terrible! I won't have heaven with Vinnie?

SHAKESPEARE

(getting out of his chair)

Emily. Emily, let's be clear now, you *are* getting a *further life*, in fact you are getting endless life, you are getting *immortality*.

EMILY

Yes, but without Vinnie? It's not fair. It's not just. God allowed this? How awful of him. If there is one. Is there?

SAPPHO

Well...

EMILY

It doesn't matter. *It is not fair.*

SHAKESPEARE

I'm sure William *Cooper*'d love to see you, out in his fringe.

(SAPPHO quiets him with a gesture.)

EMILY

How terribly lonely. I mean, a cloud, how wonderful. But endless life without Vinnie? Life's not life without Vinnie. Not even regular life, life Down There. Not even Death.

SAPPHO

One does get used to it.

EMILY

Lord, how I'd love to know what she's doing now. She's probably making dinner. Probably cooking, anyway.

SAPPHO

No. She is probably, I am sorry to say, preparing for your funeral.

EMILY

Oh, yes. That. I forgot for a moment. I've passed. Haven't I.

SAPPHO

One does forget, for a while.

EMILY

It was so strange. The passing, I mean. Lying there in bed, the faces all around, all the beautiful faces. Vinnie of course, holding my hand, so tightly, so very tightly. Maggie, our maid. Susan, dear Austin's wife. He was out pacing in the yard. He said he wanted to smoke a cigar but really he just couldn't bear to watch. And then – quite abruptly – this fading. Of everything. But not a frightening fade, not a lid coming down. More of an expansion, somehow. A going out. And the funny thing is, just at that moment – I heard a fly. I did! As if I were a prophetess. I heard a fly. Just like a little poem I once wrote.

SAPPHO

Say your poem. Please.

EMILY

Oh, do you know it somehow?

(Recites:)

I hear a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

(A pause.)

SHAKESPEARE

It's wonderful.

EMILY

Yet nothing else was the way I wrote it, except for the fly. The eyes were not dry. Vinnie was weeping. Maggie, sobbing sobbing sobbing. I had not willed away my keepsakes. Selfishly. Since I knew, I mean, knew that I was dying. I had just written my dear dear cousins, the Norcrosses, to tell them. They're probably reading the letter right now...

SAPPHO

How did you tell them?

EMILY

A short letter. I said, "Little Cousins. Called back. Emily."

SHAKESPEARE

My God.

SAPPHO

Yes. My God.

EMILY

Well, what can I do? About all this? Can I, can I leave, or...? Can I at least haunt them?

SAPPHO

You cannot go back. Earth is closed to you now.

EMILY

Can I turn this down? Heaven?

SAPPHO

I am so sorry. You are – unfortunately – immortal.

EMILY

But why? How? How did I of all people deserve this kind of treatment?

SAPPHO

You are asking seriously?

EMILY

Yes. Why am I here and not my father or my mother? Why?

SHAKESPEARE

Because of one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine poems.

EMILY

No.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes.

EMILY

I thought I might get immortality by being *good*. A good person.

SAPPHO

I'm sorry.

EMILY

It was *the poems*? Really? But I was just, I wasn't attempting anything writing them, I was just... I was just...

SHAKESPEARE

Writing.

EMILY

Just writing. I didn't live to write. I just wrote. The same way I brushed my teeth, or breathed, or went to funerals.

SHAKESPEARE

What *did* you live for?

EMILY

Well. To live. To love the world while I had it. For hollyhocks and irises and my dog Carlo. I thought that I might meet him, too. Poetry was just a, you know, a hobby.

SAPPHO

A hobby...

EMILY

So that's why you said *immortality*. You didn't mean immortality with God, you meant the cheap kind, with literature. So what did *you* live for?

SAPPHO

For fame, I suppose. To win lovers...

EMILY

And you?

SHAKESPEARE

For gold, for real estate in Stratford. It was a job. For, I don't know what.

EMILY

So none of us lived for poetry. Good Lord. Now look what we've done to ourselves. I can't believe I've done this, I can't believe I've done it to myself! How stupid. How awful. How tragic. It's like, I don't know, Sophocles or something.

SHAKESPEARE

He's floating around here somewhere...

EMILY

But where will Vinnie go? When she passes? Or Austin, or Maggie?

SAPPHO

They will go into the nothingness. Out there somewhere.

EMILY

If I go far enough, from here, would I reach it?

SAPPHO

You can't. Your poems have already done the work. You belong here, they belong to the world.

EMILY

The world can have the poems! You can have them! *I want my sister!* I want Vinnie!
(*Silence.*)

Well, listen, it was lovely to meet you two.

SAPPHO

You are not *going*...?

EMILY

This is all very nice. And thank you for the hospitality. But – no thank you. It's just not for me. I mean, you don't even have night! I'm half night, I love the night. Endless daytime? No thank you.

SHAKESPEARE

How very New England.

SAPPHO

But Emily, it's not possible. Once you are immortal, you are immortal.

EMILY

I'm not immortal. The poems are. Here. You can have them.

(*EMILY produces a thick packet of poems.*)

SAPPHO

But how do you know, if you go out there, you will get your wish?

EMILY

I don't. Have you ever tried it? Or anyone up here?

SAPPHO

No...

EMILY

I'll try it.

SHAKESPEARE

You'll try for nothingness?

EMILY

It's better than this. And it's just and fair to my family, to Mr. Bowles and Miss Jenkins. I'm sorry.

SAPPHO

You are not afraid?

EMILY

Of what? I was afraid on earth sometimes. Afraid of possible nothingness. I have no time for that now. I'll have what Vinnie will have. That's heaven enough.

SHAKESPEARE

You're a brave girl.

SAPPHO

Woman, thank you.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, please. Give it a rest.

EMILY

I came from that way, I think. I'll try that.

SHAKESPEARE

You don't care to taste some nectar of the gods before you head off?

EMILY

I drank nectar every day for 55 years. It was called breathing.

SAPPHO

(embracing Emily)

You darling. May I kiss you before you go?

EMILY

If you like.

SAPPHO

We could have been *such* good friends.

SHAKESPEARE

(holding out a hand)

May I have the honor, Miss Dickinson?

EMILY

Yes, of course. Um...

SHAKESPEARE

Will.

EMILY

Of course, Will.

(THEY shake hands.)

Well. I'm off then. Oh! Will you tell William Cooper I love his poetry?

SHAKESPEARE

I will tell him. But – Emily – can you explain one thing? What were all those dashes?

EMILY

What dashes?

SAPPHO

Nothing. Nothing. Never mind.

EMILY

Goodbye, then. Goodbye, heaven. Goodbye, eternity. Goodbye.

(EMILY EXITS the way she came in.)

SHAKESPEARE

You know what she meant, don't you.

SAPPHO

Good riddance.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes. Good riddance.

(A pause)

SAPPHO

(suddenly intoning, singing intensely)

Emily! Emily Dickinson! How could you leave me, leave me, leave me... Emilyyyyyy...!

(SAPPHO EXITS singing. SHAKESPEARE pours himself another chaliceful of nectar.)

SHAKESPEARE

(toasting the absent EMILY)

Well, safe home.

(Drinks.)

Now wait a minute. This is a *great idea*...! Where's my quill...? Where's your quill, Will?

(Produces a writing quill from his doublet.)

And a bit of ink...

(A bottle of ink appears.)

Thank you. Now...! The scene is heaven. We find William Shakespeare, the great poet, on a cloud, reading a newspaper...

(SHAKESPEARE starts scribbling on the newspaper.)

(LIGHTS FADE. END OF PLAY.)

NOTES: The Sappho poem at the top is #1 from the Loeb Classics edition, and her words here translate “Ornate-throned immortal Aphrodite, wile-weaving daughter of Zeus, I entreat you...”

The second outburst from Sappho is #2 in that edition, and translates as “Come hither to me, to this holy temple...”

“William Cooper,” by the way, is William Cowper, pronounced “Cooper,” an 18th-century poet.