A Mind of One’s Own

Delving into the world of Emily Dickinson
by NELL PORTER BROWN

In a small New England town, sitting at a plain wooden table, 17 3/8ths inches square, Emily Dickinson created nearly 1,800 poems that continue toEntrance and mystify readers across the globe.

That table will again be on display at Harvard’s Houghton Library, known for its Dickinson collection, when building renovations are completed this fall. But far more riveting is seeing its replica within the context of her intensely private domain: her bedroom at The Emily Dickinson Museum, in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The restored room, along with the parlor, library, and conservatory, is part of the guided tour that starts as a literary pilgrimage of sorts at The Homestead, where Dickinson spent most of her life. From there visitors move across a broad lawn, through old trees, to an Italianate-style home, The Evergreens, that is a virtual nineteenth-century time capsule—down to the wood stove, toilet closet, and nursery bedroom—of the way it was when Dickinson’s older brother, Austin, and his wife, Susan Gilbert Dick-
YOU NEVER ACTUALLY OWN A PATEK PHILIPPE.
YOU MERELY TAKE CARE OF IT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION.

CALATRAVA REF. 6006G

LUX BOND & GREEN
JEWELERS SINCE 1898
416 Boylston Street · Boston Back Bay · 617-266-4747
STAFF PICK: Atwood’s Tavern

Every Monday night, an infectious, foot-stomping—and free—bluegrass show goes live at Atwood’s Tavern in East Cambridge, one of the only bars in Greater Boston devoted to American roots and folk music.

“There are only two places where you can see bluegrass: at festivals and at bars like this,” veteran Boston-area banjoist Eric Royer, a regular performer at Atwood’s Mondays, told the crowd on a recent night. Royer and another local favorite, the multi-instrumentalist and singer Sean Staples, are frequent performers, but fans of the art form will also find a rotating cast of bluegrass musicians belting out classics and original songs. Newcomers are warmly welcomed: even those who know nothing of the genre can easily hum along with lyrical, crowd-pleasing tunes like “Little Liza Jane” and “Long Black Veil.”

The bar’s lineup encompasses Americana and jug bands, too—along with an eclectic mix of folk musicians. The ethereal singer-songwriter Pieta Brown and Boston-based rock/blues artist Danielle Miraglia, among others, take the stage in March and April. Some matinee and Sunday shows, like those by the wry-humored, orange-electric-guitar-wielding Matt Heaton, are geared to kids and families. These homey events lend a community, Irish-pub feel to the place.

Atwood’s is an ideal spot for a unique dinner date or a meet-up to enjoy drinks and music with friends, thanks to the extensive whiskey menu that matches its bluegrass mood, and moderately priced dishes with options for every palate. Try the Bantam Rojo, a tart cider made with sour cherries and black peppercorns, from the Somerville-based Bantam Cider Company, with the tofu tikka masala, a delicious take on the Indian dish, featuring crispy tofu and sweet potatoes. The grainy, house-made dill hummus with warm pita makes for a perfect start, while the oat and black-bean burger with guacamole is a heartier entrée option. A dusting of cornstarch makes the sweet potato fries perfectly crisp, with none of the mushy sweetness that has given the dish a bad name.

Only a handful of tables frame the stage in the rear of the small space, with additional seating along the bar and at adjacent tables. (If the early spring weather’s right, the seating on the cozy, communal-style patio fills quickly.) “A pretty loyal following of 20-ish regulars will come in every Monday,” says manager Alex Sirigu, but “a table isn’t too hard to find” by the time the music begins at 8:30. The barely elevated stage and brick and wood-paneled walls add to the feeling of intimacy. Audience members almost become participants in the performance; bartender Liam Dav-enport playfully heckles the musicians. These days, Eric Royer said, bluegrass is reaching broader, younger audiences beyond its Appalachian roots because listeners crave these small, acoustic shows: “It’s almost like a reaction to a lot of technological stuff that we’re experiencing now.”

“The beautiful thing about this music is it’s not really...designed to be put on a stage,” Staples added. “It’s designed to be an inclusive kind of music—to be in small rooms like this.”

Clockwise, from above: Sean Staples, Hazel Royer, and Eric Royer perform; the tasty tofu tikka masala; a stylish exterior; and a typical lively night at the bar

Marina N. Bolotnikova

English poet and academic Malcolm Guite thought so, too. He saw the room in 2016 and “was filled with wonder at how much had flowed from so small a space,” his blog notes, “but then I thought about Dickinson’s characteristically concentrated
and terse verse forms; those compact and concentrated little quatrains with the emphatic dashes linking and yet binding in the energy of her phrases, and it seemed to me the smallness of the desk was itself part of the form of the poetry, part of her gift.”

So, it seems, are the large windows of her corner room, through which light pours throughout the day. And the wallpaper: a vivid pattern of entwined wild pink roses, now reproduced based on an excavated scrap. Much of Dickinson’s poetry explores death, grief, nature, and an unearthly spirituality. She could be highly theatrical, and self-referential. Questions about her physical and mental health have long spurred speculation: was she a depressive? Bipolar? Agoraphobic? “There’s talk about her as this quiet, meek ‘spinster’ who was a recluse, and lived this sort of terrified life,” Lackey points out. But seeing the vibrancy of her restored room, and learning of her devotion, and playful writings, to a circle of family and friends, reveal that hers was “not a sort of dark and humble life. It was really bright and beautiful.”

Through her windows, Dickinson would have viewed a sweeping meadow and The Evergreens’ picturesque landscape. She was a passionate amateur botanist, as a teenager collecting more than 400 specimens and pressing them into her Herbarium (also at Houghton), and a lifelong gardener. Her father built her a small conservatory on the side of the house, where she tended calla lilies, gardenias, (please turn to page 16P)
Beginning your spring home search?

Turn to our experts for guidance on everything from how to start the home-buying process to the best bites in the neighborhood.

Katie Malin
katie.malin@compass.com
781.799.5981
@compasskatie

Insiders' Event: PorchFest
Every year, musicians and bands throughout Somerville come together to celebrate and utilize an underused public venue: The Porch.

Robin Repucci
robin.repucci@compass.com
617.388.3312
@robinrepucci

Favorite Restaurant: Giulia
It feels like a trattoria in Italy. Order the chicken liver crostini and pasta, or try the Chef's Table—a five-course menu at the whim of the Chef. Buon appetito!

Chris Roy
chris.roy@compass.com
781.801.4215
@chris_roy_realty

Go-To Brunch Spot: Mistral
No misses on this menu. Grab a seat at the bar, where the elegant yet relaxing scene is the perfect way to unwind after a long week. Try my personal favorites, the wild mushroom omelette with boursin cheese or the blueberry lemon poppy seed pancakes with whipped ricotta.
Weekend Routine: Fresh Pond and Sofra Cafe
Calm your mind and excite your taste buds! Get a nature fix on the paths around Fresh Pond and then head to Ana Sortun’s Sofra Cafe for scrumptious Middle Eastern pastries or lunch. You won’t be disappointed!

Melissa Baldwin
melissa.baldwin@compass.com
617.749.6006
@melissaheartshomes

Best Bakery: Elmendorf
This is my favorite café spot right now — and it’s just down the way from the newly renovated Valente Branch Library. Win-win!

Bryan Joyce and Teresa Surette
bryan.joyce@compass.com     781.727.9284
teresa.surette@compass.com  617.435.5473

Favorite Free Outdoor Activity: Minuteman Bikeway
Easily accessible from the city, this bikeway connects the vibrant downtowns of Arlington and Lexington with the Great Meadows wildlife refuge of Bedford. You can stop for breakfast, lunch, coffee, or all three on your tour de force of some of the greatest Greater Boston locales — all along a well-maintained paved path.

Compass is a licensed real estate broker and abides by Equal Housing Opportunity laws. All material presented herein is intended for informational purposes only. Information is compiled from sources deemed reliable but is subject to errors, omissions, changes in price, condition, sale, or withdrawal without notice. No statement is made as to the accuracy of any description. All measurements and square footages are approximate. This is not intended to solicit property already listed. Nothing herein shall be construed as legal, accounting or other professional advice outside the realm of real estate brokerage.
JOIN MORE THAN 10,000 HARVARD ALUMNI

Whether you’re in the Square or across the world, show your true Crimson pride by carrying the Harvard Alumni World MasterCard®.

Join more than 10,000 Harvard alumni already taking advantage of best-in-class rewards and unrivaled service you won’t get with any other card.

THE ONLY CREDIT CARD OFFERED EXCLUSIVELY TO HARVARD ALUMNI

FEATUREING:

NO Annual Fees

NO Foreign Transaction Fees

NO Blackout Dates or Travel Restrictions

HARVARDCARD.COM
At Cadbury Commons You Become Family

Charles Kelley devoted his life to caring for elders. The Kelley family continues his vision. Since 1995, Cadbury Commons has remained a family owned and operated Independent and Assisted Living Community.

Call (617) 868-0575 to arrange a personal tour, or visit cadburycommons.com
66 Sherman Street, Cambridge, MA 02140 • (617) 868-0575

We know where to start...
We are Southern New England's premier moving concierge service.

Unique Value of Simplified Lives
1. One call to handle all client downsizing/moving needs; no more multiple calls to multiple vendors
2. Simplified Lives professionalism, diplomacy and high-touch service
3. Proven ability to deliver exceptional customer service
4. All staff insured & bonded

Valerie Aehorn, KSG/MPA
President
508-332-8601 or 401-480-1532
info@simplifiedlives.com

We have lived here 40 years!! HELP!!!

(continued from page 16K) and inland but-tercups. Nature, as The Gardens of Emily Dick-inson, by Judith Farr, indicates, lent vitality and endless inspiration: one-third of Dickinson's poems, and half her letters, mention her favorite flowers. Often, she records the most precious, minute observations: "A Bird, came down the Walk-/He did not know I saw-/He hit an Angle Worm in halves/And ate the fellow, raw./And then, he drank a Dew/From a convenient Grass-/And then hopped sidewise to the Wall/To let a Beetle pass —...”*

From her perch, Dickinson could also glimpse Amherst's town center, although that vista was likely a mere backdrop to the infinitely more compelling world of her own mind. "There is a solitude of space/A solitude of sea/A solitude of Death, but these/Society shall be/Compared with that pro-
founder site/That polar privacy/A soul ad-
mitted to itself—.

Tours of The Homestead, opening for the season on February 28, also stop in the “po-
etry room” (likely the former bedroom of Emily's sister, Lavinia), to convey a sense of how revolutionarily different Dickinson's verses were from those of her more floridly descriptive contemporaries like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Highlighting her process (and supporting the notion that she herself sometimes created different versions of essentially the same poems) a wall exhibit depicts her line “A chilly Peace infests the Grass,” showing how she'd marked the manus-
script with asterisked potential replace-
ments for “chilly”—“warning” or “lone-
some”—and how they completely shift the poem's meaning. Because different people later transcribed and edited her work, it can be impossible to track the original intent (or intents).

Downstairs, another exhibit displays a copy of the only verified daguerreotype of the poet, taken when she was a teenager, and spotlights a few replicas of her hand-written poems and letters. It also tells the basic story of her life, explaining key Dick-
inson family members and the complex dy-
namics surrounding the posthumous pub-
lication of her work.

Her father, Edward, was a reserved man, prominent lawyer, and state representa-
tive; her mother, Emily Norcross Dickin-

*This Dickinson text—#359—and #1696 and #1091 below, are from R.W. Franklin, The Poems of Em-
son, a talented gardener, was apparently quite aloof, at least at times, in her daughter’s eyes. For years, she suffered from a mysterious ailment, and was later bedridden from a stroke and a broken hip. Both daughters tended her (Emily’s room connected to hers by a passage).

In contrast to Dickinson’s quiet life, Austin and Susan lived gregariously with their three children at The Evergreens. A girlhood friend of Emily’s, Susan was the reigning emotional, and possibly erotic, center of her life. Nothing at the museum characterizes their relationship that way, but guides do address it on the tour. “Emily’s correspondence to Susan in their late teens and early twenties was highly charged and, I think, clearly shows someone who is in love,” says museum executive director Jane Wald. “We don’t have the other side of that correspondence, so we don’t know what Susan’s frame of mind was.” (Complicating matters later, the exhibit notes, was the scandalous affair between Austin and Mabel Loomis Todd, an Amherst faculty wife, begun in 1882.)

Friends and family knew Dickinson was a poet: she saw maybe 10 poems published, and sent up to 500 to people (more than 250 to Susan alone). Yet only after Dickinson’s death from Bright’s disease in 1886 did her sister find the volume of works that today form her legacy. “Some of them were on chocolate wrappers and the backs of recipes,” Lackey says—Dickinson was a devoted baker—and 800 were neatly penned in 40 fascicles: delicate, stringed booklets that Dickinson created between 1858 and 1865.

Lavinia saw their literary value, and asked Susan Dickinson first, and then Mabel Loomis Todd, to help publicize them. Todd and prominent literary critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, A.B. 1841, edited a batch—changing Dickinson’s signature spacing, sparseness, and punctuation, and adding titles—for publication in 1890. Todd then produced two more volumes before an acrimonious legal fight over the fate of Dickinson’s poems ensued that ultimately delayed their publication in full until 1955. Despite the liberties taken, Lackey says that, without that initial push and Higginson’s professional stature, Dickinson’s unorthodox poems “likely would not have the fame that they do today.”

At Dickinson’s request, Lavinia burned her sister’s personal papers. But, puzzlingly, despite preparing the fascicles, Dickinson never specified what to do with them. During her most creative period she had initiated a correspondence with Higginson—famously asking, in 1862: “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?”—that would last until she died. In one letter, she described herself: “I am small, like the wren, and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur, and my eyes like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.” In another, she alluded to his support of her writing as saving her life. Yet she coyly danced around publication, and refused his invitation to travel to discuss it—“I do not cross my Father’s ground to any House or town”—instead inviting him to Amherst. In 1868, he came, and found her to be a plain woman dressed in white, writing later that he had never met “with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her.”

As Dickinson retreated, her brother’s Tours of The Evergreens—an 1856 Italianate house—focus on Dickinson family members and on an unusual collection of period art and objects.
Your fitness resolutions may not last, but we’ve got your real estate ones covered.

Currier, Lane & Young
currierlaneyoung@compass.com
617.871.9190
@currierlaneyoung
compass.com

Currier, Lane & Young is a team of real estate agents affiliated with Compass, a licensed real estate broker, and abide by equal housing opportunity laws.

—

The house next door became a “hot spot in mid-1800s Amherst,” Lackey notes. Austin practiced law with his father, and later became the Amherst College treasurer; Susan was known as a highly capable and intelligent woman—and a careful, valued reader of Dickinson’s poems. The couple entertained, enjoying an intellectual, “high-society life” in the bustling college town. Their art-filled home reflected European works—a replica of Antonio Canova’s sculpture of Cupid and Psyche over a marble fireplace—and paintings echoing the Hudson River School; the roughly 8,000 objects represent a relatively rare assemblage of a nineteenth-century household, Wald notes. The pieces stand intact with the vintage wallpaper, amid streaks of dust and soot, and plaster, crumbling in spots. In the room of their younger son, Gib (Emily Dickinson’s much-loved nephew), who died of typhoid fever as a child, his jacket is neatly folded across the little bed. Their daughter, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, kept the house, living among the relics, until she died in 1943. Her heirs eventually established a trust to ensure its preservation and use as a “cultural facility.” The Homestead and The Evergreens were merged to form The Emily Dickinson Museum in 2003.

Yet even as The Evergreens and family tales contextualize Dickinson’s art and life, she herself can never be fully known—just as her writings are continually reread to reveal new facets. As a late poem implies, her own “room,” her universe—or maybe anyone’s interiority—was all there is to know.

Sweet hours have perished here,
This is a mighty room -
Within its precincts hopes have played,
Now shadows in the tomb.

On a last tantalizing note, that poem’s original manuscript is now lost. The text above comes from a handwritten transcription by Mabel Loomis Todd, as she prepared to publish it in her 1896 Dickinson volume. At some point, she lined out the transcribed word “timid,” writing “mighty” in blue pencil instead, and changed the transcribed word “fallow” to “shadows.” Todd’s version is widely quoted, although Dickinson scholar R.W. Franklin chose timid and follow for his seminal 1998 text. But—what was Dickinson’s intent? Was the room “mighty” or “timid”? Were her hopes “shadows,” or the more unfulfilled “fallow”? By guarding her writings and failing to publish them while alive, Dickinson reserved the right “To own the Art within the Soul,” as she once put it. Forever.