Dickinson and the Elements
I’m Nobody! Who are you? Are you – Nobody – too? Then there’s a pair of us! Are you – Nobody – too? This “writing on water / writing on air”...
peared to ask those of us who came upon—"Somebody"—or anybody—that most troublesome of questions: "Who are you?"

Seen from the sidewalks outside the library, the floating letters and words assumed their shifting formation in relation to the reader’s own movements, seen either from the front, to the side, or even upside down and “backward”—from behind. Also, seen frequently on the library’s pond, alongside the poem’s two large lines of language, were the Canadian geese that annually migrate here in the fall, swimming both around and di- 
dian geese that annually migrate here in 

- upside down and “backward” – from 

the words read in this constantly changing manner, the adjusted light of the letters, in turn, adjusted the question being asked – “Who are you?” — into one perhaps more plaintive or poignant, like one body of water addressing another (our own!), making “a pair of us” in the exchange. Later, as the sun would set, the growing darkness slowly absorbed the poem entirely, erasing it from view (that portion of the poem’s second line from Dickinson’s own line-dividing dashes, the next two sections of the sentence were dimensionally connected as one climbed the stairs, first with “to be –” attached to the windows between the second and third floors, and then, between the third and fourth floors, that final large word “Some body!” suspended boldly alone. Once in place, those words on the window were both seen, and seen through, in relation to those other words of Dickinson’s poem simultaneously seen out on the wa- ter, the various lines of language shifting their locations, intersecting and overlap- ping, offering in the momentary adjacen- cies suggestions of unexpected formation. Reading this poem inside and out, from the library’s first floor to its fourth, parts of its three spatially staggered lines could at times be read directly upon, or along- side, those floating out on the pond, form- ing such arrangements as the following:

- “How dreary –” / “I’m Nobody” (as if characterizing the dreary condition described)

Or:

- “Who are you?” / “to be –” (insinuating the audacity of the claim being made)

Or:

- “I’m Nobody? Who are you?” / “Somebody!” (That single word on the window, “Somebody!” heard as an affirmative response to the pointed question being asked out on the water)

Seeing and reading in such kaleidoscopic motion, those of us walking up and down the library’s stairs moved (like a passing cloud) through the poem, as the poem appeared to move порously through us. Each particular arrangement of language gave way to another, and then to another, in temporary and contingent alignment to one’s own floating movements through the stairway.

Weeks Three and Four: After two weeks, during which the initial arrangement of the poem’s words remained largely un- 


\[\text{How dreary — to be — Somebody!}\]

\[\text{I’m Nobody! Who are you?}\]

Cloudy days, sunny days, windy and rainy days, through them all the words of the poem endured, with the chang- ing light constantly shifting the look of the language, the shadows of sense and suggestion at play on the pond. On bright afternoons, the letters glistened or glared, with tall trees mirrored upside- down and backwards onto the watery world, or a solitary cloud might be seen to float through the line “I’m Nobody!” — ephemerally offering a kind of objec- tive correlative to that nobody before us. But, at other times, as more clouds moved in, covering the sky, those words on the water might suddenly appear soft and diaphanous, the actual plastic of each letter magically transforming into a kind of translucent film of shaped light. With 4Such seeing-in-motion suggests something of Baudel- laine’s 19th century Parisian flâneur transported to 21st century Florida, that “kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multi- plicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. It is an eye alert for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting” (Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life).
once more the kayak, the words on the pond were rearranged and rewritten, creating a new formation in which the original two-part exclamation and question “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” was radically reduced, with just the single large words “Somebody” and “Nobody” now made to intersect at the very center of the pond.

Inside the library, a similar reduction occurred, such that all that remained of the previous sentence on the windows (having taken down both “How dreary – –” and “Somebody!”) were the two small words “to be – –” suspended alone, seen still between the second and third floors at the center of the stairway. In this new arrangement, these words were then seen in direct relation to the “Somebody | Nobody” intersecting out on the pond. Those two key (and capitalized) words, those two bodies from the first and second stanzas of Dickinson’s poem, were joined together as a “pair,” while dimensionally aligning with the “to be – –” superimposed upon them through the library’s windows. Offering a kind of watery correlative to Baudelaire’s flâneur (with his “ego athirst for the non-ego”), it was as if the intersecting words written on water were suddenly uttering a delayed response to the initial question asked the previous weeks: “Who are you?!” Absorbed in their own conjunction, those words remaining on the pond were now interconnected, permeably floating as “Somebody | Nobody,” as bodies of water overlapping in motion, bodies of water crossing in time.

Works Cited


"Emily Dickinson International Society (EDIS)"

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