

A still—Volcano—Life—



POEM TEXT

- 1 A still—Volcano—Life—
- 2 That flickered in the night—
- 3 When it was dark enough to do
- 4 Without erasing sight—
- 5 A quiet—Earthquake Style—
- 6 Too subtle to suspect
- 7 By natures this side Naples—
- 8 The North cannot detect
- 9 The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—
- 10 The lips that never lie—
- 11 Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
- 12 And Cities—ooze away—

The speaker describes “a life” that seems as peaceful and non-threatening as a “still volcano” that “flicker[s] in the night.” In other words, this “life” seems calm and restrained, like a volcano whose mild “flicker” can be seen only when it’s dark out. Indeed, the speaker says that any movement here is “too subtle to suspect”—that is, too unremarkable to arouse suspicion, tricking people into thinking there’s nothing dangerous or exciting happening.

Yet this calm surface conceals inner volatility and power. Both volcanic and seismic activity largely take place under the ground, meaning that whatever’s happening on the surface is a poor indication of what’s brewing beneath. People, the poem implies, can likewise conceal what’s really going on with them. Dickinson, for her part, was a seismic source of poetic imagination, even if people could not “detect” what she was working on. She often composed at night (perhaps reflected here in the fact that the volcano in this poem “flickers” at night), published very little in her own lifetime, and rarely left her New England home. Though she wrote prolifically in private, her creative power and potential remained largely hidden from the public eye.

Note, too, that Dickinson was constrained not just by her own shyness but also by the gender norms of the mid-19th century. This was a period during which women were expected to be sexually pure, demure, and obedient to the men in their lives, ornaments rather than creative forces. The “still,” “quiet” life here might represent the way women like Dickinson were constrained by society, pushed to seem chaste and agreeable regardless of their inner frustration, anger, sexual desires, and so on.

Even if people don’t recognize the existence of others’ inner power and passions, the speaker insists, those powers are still there and still potent. Indeed, the very fact of being silent for so long can make eruptions of powerful feeling all the more devastating. A quiet volcano might one day “part” its “lips”—that is, erupt—and destroy entire cities. Likewise, a person’s inner fire, creativity, and sensuality, once released, might raze civilizations—or create art that changes the world. The poem thus speaks not just to the contrast between people’s inner and outer realities, but also to the power of literature (and perhaps female expression) to reshape the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12



SUMMARY

A quiet sort of life lies dormant like a volcano, flickering dimly at night-time—when it’s dark but not so dark that you can’t see.

Something like an earthquake rumbles quietly below the surface. It’s too gentle to be detected by anyone this side of Italy. The people in the north have no idea that there’s an intense volcano about to open its truthful mouth. The red stones steam and hiss as they open and close, wiping out entire cities in a flow of lava.



THEMES



INNER POWER VS. SURFACE REALITY

Though Dickinson’s poem *appears* to be about a volcano, most scholars agree that it’s actually a self-portrait. Dickinson lived a reclusive life, all while writing what would become, after her death, some of the most influential poetry in the English language. The volcano in this poem might represent Dickinson herself, or anyone whose restrained demeanor belies the scorching power, volatility, and turmoil within. The poem suggests that intense emotions and immense potential often bubble beneath the quiet surface of things. The poem is also often read as depicting the way patriarchal societies repress *female* power and desire—forces that the world underestimates at its peril.



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*A still—Volcano—Life—
That flickered in the night—
When it was dark enough to do
Without erasing sight—*

"A still—Volcano—Life" describes precisely the type of life that Emily Dickinson herself led: one of enormous power contained beneath a quiet surface.

Dickinson lived in 19th-century New England, in a society that expected women to be passive and obedient. Hardly anyone knew that Dickinson spent her nights writing some of the most important poetry in the English language. Like a volcano, then, Dickinson's life was one of surface calm masking an interior world of energy, creative power, and destructive potential. The same could be said of many women living under patriarchal norms at the time.

The "Volcano" the poem describes works as a [metaphor](#) for something potentially powerful but apparently calm. The speaker uses the word "volcano" as an adjective here, describing a kind of "Life"; indeed, an earlier draft used "Volcanic" rather than "Volcano." Take a look at Dickinson's [caesurae](#) here:

A still— || Volcano— || Life—

Those intense pauses emphasize the word "Volcano," making it seem all the more strange and powerful.

This "still—Volcano—Life" flickers during the night, but it's hardly noticed—an image that also suggests this poem is a self-portrait. Dickinson usually wrote at night, and the volcano's "flicker[ing]" calls to mind the light of a candle.

Lines 3 and 4 present some interpretive difficulties:

When it was dark enough to do
Without erasing sight—

These words might refer to a time of night when the conditions are just right for composing poetry. Or darkness might suggest sleep and "sight" the *insight* of the imagination, the volcanic, creative, below-the-surface work taking place during the dark hours.

The words "erasing sight" could also apply to the "Volcano—Life" itself—suggesting this life can be so bright that it becomes invisible or impossible to look at. Perhaps this hints at a potentially destructive power in the volcano life's hidden creativity.

LINES 5-8

*A quiet—Earthquake Style—
Too subtle to suspect
By natures this side Naples—
The North cannot detect*

The second stanza has a similar structure to the first, describing another kind of hidden power. Line 5 echoes line 1 through [parallelism](#):

A still—Volcano—Life—
[...]
A quiet—Earthquake Style—

This tells the reader that both stanzas describe the same deceptively "quiet" person and their concealed might.

Line 5 describes this person's "quiet—Earthquake Style"—that is, a way of doing things (a style) that's as powerful as an earthquake, but still unobtrusive. This "Style" is "too subtle to suspect"—that is, undetectable by most people. Notice how the whispery [sibilance](#) of "subtle" and "suspect" makes that "Earthquake Style" sound secret and shadowy.

Again, readers might interpret these lines biographically. Dickinson didn't publish much, and male editors often made tin-eared "corrections" to her work when it did eventually see the light of day. The power of her "Earthquake Style" was imperceptible to some of her earliest publishers.

Line 7 explains *who* exactly fails to "suspect" this volcano/earthquake-like life taking place: "natures this side Naples":

- "Natures," here, basically means "people." But the word choice makes it clear that something in these people's outlook or way of life prevents them from "suspect[ing]" the existence of hidden volcano lives and earthquake styles.
- The reference to "Naples" also [alludes](#) to the most famous volcano in history, Mount Vesuvius, which erupted and destroyed a number of cities near Naples in AD 79. The eruption killed many people and came as a complete surprise.
- Its mention here, then, suggests that there might be more going on than meets the eye in other situations too. Just as the people of Pompeii didn't expect to be encased in ash, those who can't perceive a "still—Volcano—Life" don't expect quiet, unobtrusive people to conceal massive powers.

"The North" in line 8 might suggest (north) American society, or perhaps even Dickinson's home, the northeastern U.S. state of Massachusetts, specifically—places, the poem suggests, where people are particularly unresponsive to seismic power.

LINES 9-12

*The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—
The lips that never lie—
Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
And Cities—ooze away—*

Through an [enjambment](#), line 9 picks up where line 8 left off:

The North cannot detect
The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—

Here, the poem toys with the reader, blurring the lines between what's real and what's not. Not many people will interpret the poem as being about a real volcano, but for the most part the volcano gets treated as something concrete. Now, the speaker here flat-out says that the volcano is a "Symbol" for something else. In other words, the speaker invites the reader to puzzle out what the volcano could be other than, well, a volcano.

Consider the two adjectives that describe this symbol-volcano. It's "solemn," grand and serious. But it's also "torrid"—hot and passionate. It's something serious and important, then, but also something emotionally intense. Perhaps it has something to do with suppressed passion and desire, feelings that threaten to suddenly overwhelm the calm surface world.

The speaker then pictures the "lips" of this volcano-symbol parting to eject what's contained within. In a literal sense, this would be the red-hot lava that flows from an erupting volcano's mouth:

- Here, though, those parting lips might also suggest speech and poetry, a commitment to uncovering the strange reality of existence beneath the surface of everyday life.
- The image of opening lips also hints at female sexuality, suggesting genitalia. Again, this might speak to a world of suppressed energy and concealed, socially unacceptable lust.

The poem's final lines expand on the power these once-closed lips have been holding back:

Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
And Cities—ooze away—

In other words, the opening lips of the volcano spew lava that wipes out entire cities. What once seemed solid "ooze[s] away," revealed as impermanent and fragile:

- This image speaks to the power of the poetic imagination, in which creativity and destruction go hand in hand: the volcano's molten voice melts a conventional, stable world away.
- Perhaps the poem can also be read as a kind of

revenge fantasy for all the ways in which conventional society might hold a volcanic person back.

Note how the sounds of this stanza bring the image of a spewing volcano to life. The stanza is packed with oozy, molten /s/ and /z/ [sibilance](#)—"Solemn," "Symbol," "lips," "Whose hissing corals," "Cities," "ooze." It's as though the poem is suddenly overrun by the flow of lava on the page—which, if the lava stands in for poetic expression and invention, isn't so far from the truth.



POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a volcano-themed poem, "A still—Volcano—Life—" [alludes](#) to the most notorious volcanic event of all time: the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. This catastrophic eruption destroyed Pompeii (and other cities) close to Naples in Southern Italy:

A quiet—Earthquake Style—
Too subtle to suspect
By natures this side Naples—
The North cannot detect

Two main characteristics define the Vesuvius eruption: its sheer power, and the fact it came as a surprise. Many people in Pompeii died so abruptly that their bodies were entombed beneath ash in eerie, lifelike positions.

This reference colors the poem's main [metaphor](#), relating such hidden, devastating volcanic strength to a certain "Style" of life. This metaphor could refer to Dickinson's own situation: living a restrained life by day, writing passionate and groundbreaking poetry by night. But it might also evoke the position of many powerful spirits forced by convention to keep their energy under wraps.

The poem also juxtaposes Naples with "The North"—perhaps an allusion to the northeastern state of Massachusetts (where Dickinson lived). All the "natures this side" of Naples lack the know-how and experience to recognize the "Volcano—Life" and "Earthquake—Style" in their midst. In other words, practically no one in Dickinson's own society has any clue what's going on below her quiet surface.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "A quiet—Earthquake Style— / Too subtle to suspect / By natures this side Naples—"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"A still—Volcano—Life" uses the [extended metaphor](#) of volcanoes and earthquakes to discuss a certain way of life: one that seems quiet on the surface but conceals great power. Most critics believe the poem describes Dickinson herself, living a fairly restricted life while writing incredible—and secret—poetry at night.

Volcanoes and earthquakes both suggest a calm surface concealing subterranean energy and power. [Metaphorically](#) speaking, then, a volcano *life* goes largely ignored by most people who encounter it—but it's still full of seismic might.

The poem makes metaphor not just from the volcanoes and earthquakes themselves, but their features:

- The volcano's flickering light might suggest the inner fire of creativity and could even gesture to the fact that Dickinson usually worked by candlelight at night.
- And when the volcano opens "lips that never lie" (whose red-hot color the speaker evokes in a metaphor upon a metaphor, calling them "hissing Corals") the speaker suggests that poetry can be a kind of radical truth-telling, describing aspects of life and society that might otherwise remain hidden. This image of opening lips might also suggest pent-up sexuality being released at last.

These metaphors all suggest, not just that quiet surfaces might conceal raging power, but that this power might be dangerous and destructive. Perhaps the volcanic person this poem describes has reason to keep their power in check, knowing just how *much* of it lies within them.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "A still—Volcano—Life— / That flickered in the night—"
- **Line 5:** "A quiet—Earthquake Style—"
- **Lines 9-10:** "The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol— / The lips that never lie—"
- **Line 11:** "hissing Corals"

SIBILANCE

Stanzas two and three are full of hissing [sibilance](#), bringing the poem's main [metaphor](#) to vivid life.

The second stanza's sibilance is more subtle than the third's—which makes sense, given these lines discuss an "Earthquake Style" going undetected:

A quiet—Earthquake Style—
Too subtle to suspect
By natures this side Naples—

/S/ and /z/ sounds course through this section, giving it a whispery, hissing quality. This might speak to the way the "Earthquake Style" remains a secret. At the same time, the sibilance isn't *that* subtle, particularly the alliterative "subtle to suspect." Perhaps people simply aren't paying enough attention to hear what's in front of them: a volcano hissing with steam, or a poet writing groundbreaking poetry.

The third stanza dials up the sibilance further. Here, it's part of an unsettling image of the volcano parting dangerous, red-hot lips:

The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—
The lips that never lie—
Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
And Cities—ooze away

These lines have a hissing, steam-like quality—as if they're too hot to read. And the /z/ sounds in "Corals" and "ooze" are almost [onomatopoeic](#), making it easy to picture entire cities dissolving in the flow of molten lava.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Style"
- **Line 6:** "subtle," "suspect"
- **Line 7:** "natures this side Naples"
- **Line 9:** "Solemn," "Symbol"
- **Line 10:** "lips"
- **Line 11:** "Whose hissing Corals," "shut"
- **Line 12:** "Cities," "ooze"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) makes the poem sound intense, musical, and purposeful. Much of the alliteration here is also [sibilant](#), giving the second stanza an edgy hush or capturing the "hissing" sound of the [metaphorical](#) volcano's "lips" in stanza three.

Alongside all the sibilant /s/ alliteration in the second stanza, /n/ sounds link people from different places together through their shared attributes:

A quiet—Earthquake Style—
Too subtle to suspect
By natures this side Naples—
The North cannot detect

The people near "Naples" didn't expect the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. It wasn't in their "nature[]" to think that their entire world could suddenly go up in flames. Likewise, people in the North—probably the North Americans of Dickinson's day—can't "detect" what's *really* going on beneath Dickinson's own quiet surface. The /n/ sounds thus link unsuspecting human nature with two different groups of

people, both of whom share an inability to detect great power lurking beneath calm surfaces.

Notice, too, how line 10's alliterating "lips" and "lie" give the third stanza sensuality. This might hint that the "Volcano—Life" also relates to suppressed sexual desire.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dark," "do"
- **Line 6:** "subtle," "suspect"
- **Line 7:** "natures," "Naples"
- **Line 8:** "North"
- **Line 9:** "Solemn," "Symbol"
- **Line 10:** "lips," "lie"



VOCABULARY

Flickered (Line 2) - Shone intermittently, like a candle.

Naples (Line 7) - A city in southern Italy, close to the volcano Mount Vesuvius.

Solemn (Line 9) - Formal, sincere, serious.

Torrid (Line 9) - Hot and intense.

Corals (Line 11) - "Corals" are red stones made from polished bits of coral reef. Here, the speaker uses the word [metaphorically](#) to suggest the volcano's red "lips" opening up to disgorge lava.

Ooze (Line 12) - Seep, slowly flow, melt.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A still—Volcano—life" is built from three quatrains (four-line stanzas)—by far the most common stanza form in Dickinson's poetry. Notice, though, how in this poem the shape speaks to restraint and containment. All the power and energy of the "Volcano Life" is contained in a tight, conventional shape—just like Dickinson writing poetry in her room, with hardly anyone knowing about it. The unassuming form thus creates a kind of uneasy quiet, which the volcano—or "Volcano Life"—threatens one day to overwhelm.

METER

"A still—Volcano—Life" employs short [meter](#), a metrical scheme popular in the church hymns of Dickinson's day. Short meter uses [iamb](#)s—that is, metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed rhythm (da-DUM). Each [quatrain](#) has two lines of trimeter (three feet), a line of tetrameter (four feet), and a final line of trimeter.

Here's how that sounds in the first stanza:

A still | —Volcan- | o—Life—
That flick- | ered in | the night—
When it | was dark | enough | to do
Without | eras- | ing sight—

The second stanza breaks from this pattern, using tense trimeter throughout, but the final stanza returns to it.

This meter suits the poem's themes, evoking big energy contained beneath a still surface. The longer tetrameter lines might suggest an attempt to erupt, to overspill boundaries—while the return to trimeter takes the poem back to the deceptively quiet status quo.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's [rhyme scheme](#) runs like this:

ABCB

This is a typical Dickinson sound, partly informed by the hymns she encountered at church.

Note, though, how the third stanza uses [slant rhyme](#):

The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—
The lips that never lie—
Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
And Cities—ooze away—

It's a neat effect: as the speaker imagines cities "ooz[ing] away," the rhyme scheme seems to melt, too.



SPEAKER

"A still—Volcano—Life" doesn't tell the reader much directly about the identity of its speaker. Most critics, though, agree that the poem is a kind of self-portrait. The speaker describes a volcanic *life*, not an actual volcano; an "Earthquake *Style*," not an actual earthquake. The poem's images of intense power held beneath an unassuming surface, ready to break out without warning, suggest the way a person who seems quiet and meek might secretly contain reserves of passion and energy. And what better example of this could there be than Dickinson herself, secretly working away on some of the greatest and most innovative poetry in the language—while the people around her have no idea?



SETTING

The setting of "A still—Volcano—Life" is [metaphorical](#): the volcanoes and earthquakes here all lie within one outwardly quiet person. However, the poem does vividly picture this inner landscape.

In particular, the speaker [alludes](#) to Mount Vesuvius, the

famous Italian volcano which devastated Pompeii in AD 79. Just like the unlucky souls entombed in ash after that disaster, unsuspecting people "cannot detect" the seismic energy inside the person the poem portrays.

Perhaps that ignorance will become dangerous. In the final stanza, where the speaker imagines a volcano opening its "lips that never lie" and destroying everything around it with lava flow, the poem suggests that a person's secret power might be devastating if it were given full rein.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was an important part of the American Romantic movement, alongside writers like [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) and [Walt Whitman](#). She was also a one-of-a-kind writer with a distinct sensibility that set her apart from her contemporaries. Some people even see her as the grandmother of [modernism](#), the 20th-century literary movement of experimental, introspective writers like [T.S. Eliot](#) and [Virginia Woolf](#).

No one else sounds quite like Dickinson. Her poems use simple, folksy forms ([ballad](#) stanzas, for instance) in innovative ways, experimenting with innovative [slant rhymes](#), idiosyncratic punctuation, and unconventional capitalization. In only a few short stanzas, these poems explored [profound philosophical questions](#), [passionate loves](#), and the [mysteries of nature](#).

Dickinson wrote "A still—Volcano—Life" around 1862. Like most of her poetry, it wasn't published during her lifetime, first appearing in print in the 1929 collection *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Dickinson's poetry often used volcanoes as images of hidden—but potentially mighty—power. In "[I have never seen Volcanoes](#)," for example, the speaker marvels at how volcanoes could eat whole "Villages for breakfast."

Most critics agree that this poem is a self-portrait, capturing Dickinson's own secret creative energy. While Dickinson sent some poems to friends and family, she concealed most of her work and published rarely and anonymously. Only after she died did her sister Lavinia discover a trunk of nearly 1,800 poems squirreled away in her bedroom. Published at last, Dickinson's poetry became internationally famous and beloved. Dickinson's work and her life story still influence [all kinds of artists](#).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's vision of a quiet exterior concealing intense power draws on Dickinson's own experience. Dickinson was famously reclusive and shy; rarely leaving the family home she shared with her parents and her sister Lavinia, she cut a ghostly figure. In the 19th-century U.S., most women were expected to marry and have children, but Dickinson never did. In fact, towards the

end of her life, she barely spoke to anyone but a small circle of close friends and family and spent much of her later years shut up in her room.

In one sense, Dickinson shut herself away from a wildly eventful period of American history. She lived during the Civil War years and saw huge political change and chaos without ever writing much about it directly (though her many poems about [death](#) and [grief](#) suggest she was certainly affected by what was happening around her). In another sense, though, she had her finger on the world's pulse: her innovative work would one day revolutionize American poetry.

The poem also [alludes](#) to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79, which destroyed numerous cities in southern Italy (near Naples). This cataclysmic event was as unexpected as it was damaging, with no one, at that time, possessing the knowledge or tools to predict the eruption.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Dickinson Museum](#) — Visit the website of the Emily Dickinson Museum to learn more about Dickinson's life and work. (<https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org>)
- [Vesuvius at Home](#) — Read poet Adrienne Rich's essay on the contrast between Dickinson's public and private (poetry-writing) life. (<https://howtomakeapoem.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/rich-vesuvius-at-home.pdf>)
- [A Discussion of Dickinson](#) — Listen to a BBC podcast in which scholars discuss Emily Dickinson's life and work. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08p5lbp>)
- [The Poem in Manuscript](#) — Take a look at Dickinson's handwritten draft of the poem. (https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/12175014)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EMILY DICKINSON POEMS

- [A Bird, came down the Walk](#)
- [After great pain, a formal feeling comes –](#)
- [A Light exists in Spring](#)
- [A Murmur in the Trees—to note—](#)
- [A narrow Fellow in the Grass](#)
- [An awful Tempest mashed the air—](#)
- [As imperceptibly as grief](#)
- [Because I could not stop for Death –](#)
- [Before I got my eye put out](#)
- [Fame is a fickle food](#)
- [Hope is the thing with feathers](#)
- [I cannot live with You –](#)
- [I cautious, scanned my little life](#)
- [I could bring You Jewels—had I a mind to—](#)

- [I died for Beauty—but was scarce](#)
- [I dwell in Possibility –](#)
- [I felt a Funeral, in my Brain](#)
- [If I can stop one heart from breaking](#)
- [I had been hungry, all the Years](#)
- [I have a Bird in spring](#)
- [I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -](#)
- [I like a look of Agony](#)
- [I like to see it lap the Miles](#)
- [I measure every Grief I meet](#)
- [I'm Nobody! Who are you?](#)
- [I started Early – Took my Dog –](#)
- [I taste a liquor never brewed](#)
- [It was not Death, for I stood up](#)
- [I—Years—had been—from Home—](#)
- [Much Madness is divinest Sense -](#)
- [My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun](#)
- [Nature is what we see](#)
- [One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted](#)
- [Publication — is the Auction](#)
- [Safe in their Alabaster Chambers](#)
- [Success is counted sweetest](#)
- [Tell all the truth but tell it slant –](#)
- [The Brain—is wider than the Sky—](#)
- [The Bustle in a House](#)
- [The Mushroom is the Elf of Plants](#)
- [There came a Wind like a Bugle](#)

- [There is no Frigate like a Book](#)
- [There's a certain Slant of light](#)
- [There's been a Death, in the Opposite House](#)
- [The saddest noise, the sweetest noise](#)
- [The Sky is low – the Clouds are mean](#)
- [The Soul has bandaged moments](#)
- [The Soul selects her own Society](#)
- [The Wind – tapped like a tired Man –](#)
- [They shut me up in Prose –](#)
- [This is my letter to the world](#)
- [We grow accustomed to the Dark](#)
- [Wild nights - Wild nights!](#)



HOW TO CITE

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