

Find Work

by Rhina P. Espaillat

I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—
Life’s little duties do—precisely
As the very least
5 Were infinite—to me—
—Emily Dickinson, #443

My mother’s mother, widowed very young
of her first love, and of that love’s first fruit,
10 moved through her father’s farm, her country tongue
and country heart anaesthetized and mute
with labor. So her kind was taught to do—
“Find work,” she would reply to every grief—
and her one dictum, whether false or true,
15 tolled heavy with her passionate belief.
Widowed again, with children, in her prime,
she spoke so little it was hard to bear
so much composure, such a truce with time
spent in the lifelong practice of despair.
20 But I recall her floors, scrubbed white as bone,
her dishes, and how painfully they shone.