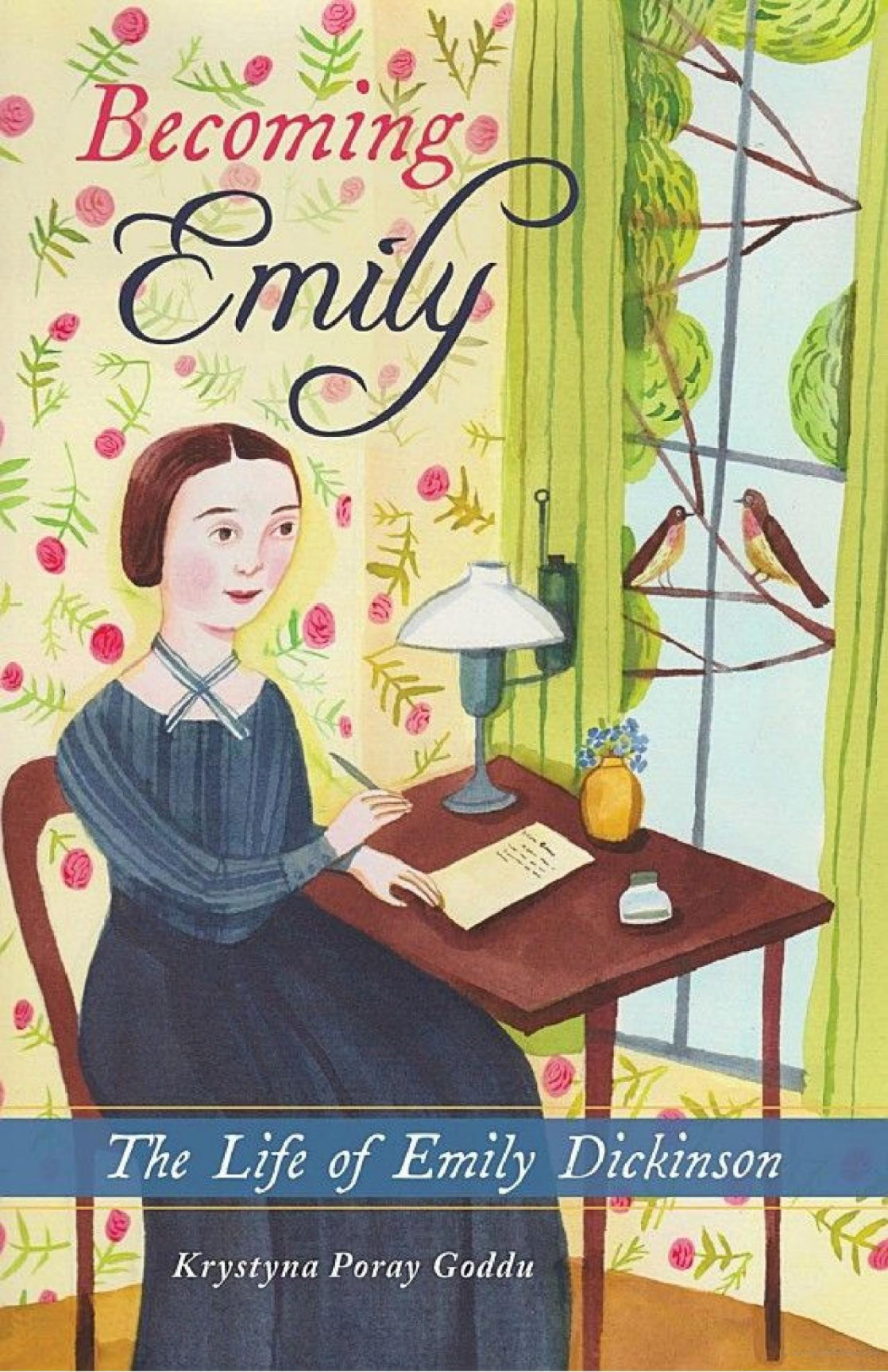

Becoming
Emily
The Life of Emily Dickinson
Krystyna Poray Goddu

Contents

Author's Note

In writing about Emily Dickinson, I have often chosen to let the poet speak for herself. This book is filled with quotations from her writings. Author of nearly 1,800 poems and more than 1,000 letters (many of which read like poems themselves), Emily had her own distinctive style. She did not adhere to traditional spelling or punctuation rules. She also wrote different drafts of many of her poems, often changing words and punctuation. She was not interested in publication and so only about 10 poems were published during her lifetime, all of them anonymously and all but one without her permission.

After her death, those who edited and published her handwritten work in print form had to make difficult decisions about which draft of a poem would have been Emily's final choice. They also had to decide whether to keep or change her often-unusual spelling and punctuation. As a result, Emily's work has been published with many variations.

In this book I have used the versions of her poems and letters as presented in the two most widely respected collections. Her poems have been copied from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, edited by R. W. Franklin and first published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in 1998. For her

letters, I have relied on the three-volume edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson with associate editor Theodora Ward and first published by the Belknap Press in 1958. In writing about the Master letters, I have used the reordering done by R. W. Franklin in *The Master Letters*, published by Amherst College Press in 1986. (I am grateful to Dickinson scholar Marta Werner for pointing me to Franklin's 1986 work.)

I'd also like to note the usage of first names for most of the figures in Emily's life. In Emily's time, people—even close friends, sometimes—addressed each other very formally. Many of the important people in Emily's life, such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Bowles, and Otis Phillips Lord, were older men. In spite of feeling very close to them, she never used their first names when writing to them. Often her letters simply begin: "Dear friend." After much thought, I decided to use first names for all the major figures in this book, regardless of how Emily might have addressed them. I hope that the use of first names will help convey the closeness Emily felt to these dear friends, who were so deeply intertwined in her heart and mind.

1

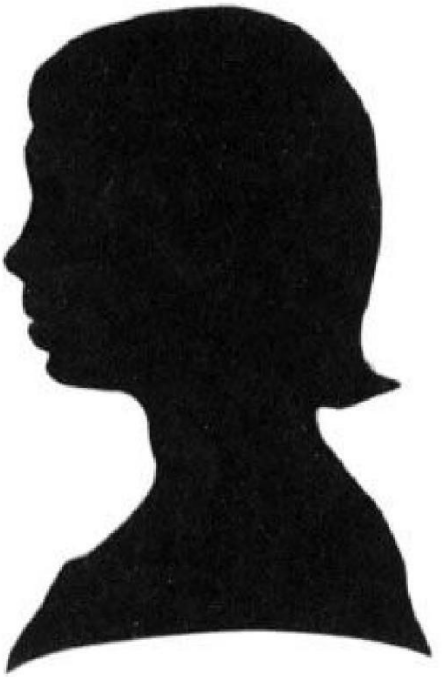
Early Childhood at the Homestead

Imagine a young woman, small like a wren, with chestnut-colored hair and matching eyes, strolling through a garden ablaze with colorful flowers: yellow heliotrope, pink and purple sweet peas, red cinnamon roses, and white jasmine. These are her children; she lovingly tends to them, year after year. A bobolink sings overhead. Soon she may wander with her big brown dog, Carlo, into the nearby woods, where her favorite wildflowers grow: violets, anemones, pink and yellow lady's slippers, and Indian pipes. She is whispering what sounds like a

prayer, but is a poem:

> Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -
> I keep it, staying at Home -
> With a Bobolink for a Chorister -
> And an Orchard, for a Dome -
>
> Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice -
> I, just wear my Wings -
> And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
> Our little Sexton - sings.
>
> God preaches, a noted Clergyman -
> And the sermon is never long,
> So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
> I'm going, all along.

It is a warm Sunday in June in the town of Amherst, in western Massachusetts. The young woman's family is at church, but she is where she feels closest to God, in nature. Soon her beloved parents and siblings will return, and they will all be together in the home she holds so dear. But for now, Emily Dickinson is blessedly alone in her own sacred place: her garden.



Silhouette of Emily at 14 years old.

Emily was born in the house that stands near that garden. Built by her grandfather, Samuel Dickinson, in 1813, it was the first brick house in town. When Emily was born there, on the cold Friday morning of December 10, 1830, just before 5:00 AM, Amherst had already been home to the Dickinsons for many generations.

Emily's ancestors had come to western Massachusetts from England in 1659 and had been among the town's founders 100 years later. The Dickinsons, like many English families in the 1600s, had left England because they wanted to simplify, or purify, the Church of England. They called themselves Puritans. Puritans thought the focus in church should be on reading the Bible, listening to sermons, and praying, in ordinary language, not the Latin of the Church of England. They believed that all decorations should be removed from churches and that no

music should be played during services. They believed church leaders should be ordinary people who wore ordinary clothes, not priests. They tried to live simple lives of faith in God, hard work, and strict rules. The leaders of the Church of England opposed the Puritan tenets and outlawed them. As a result, many Puritans left England for the new land of America so they could practice their faith freely. By the time Emily was born, Puritanism as a formal religion had died out, but her family, like numerous others in New England, still lived by many of their ancestors' rules and beliefs.

Emily's grandparents, Samuel and Lucretia, lived in the house they called the Homestead, on Amherst's Main Street, along with several of their nine children, even after the children grew up. Emily was welcomed into the large household by her parents, Edward and Emily, and her brother, Austin, several months shy of his second birthday. She was walking by the time she was 11 months old, and soon after her second birthday she had a little sister, Lavinia, who was called Vinnie.

The Homestead was a big house, set on higher ground than the street, with views of the town center to the west, the surrounding mountains to the east, and a large meadow across the road. When Emily was young, there were ten rooms, but with so many people—sometimes as many as 13—living there, Edward's family had only two bedrooms. Emily, Austin, and Vinnie shared one, and their parents used the other. Edward, a lawyer with a growing political career, was often away on business, and their mother was a shy, quiet woman who rarely showed affection, so the siblings looked to each other for companionship and comfort. They remained deeply close all their lives; they always depended on each other and hated to be separated.

After Vinnie's birth in February 1833, their mother remained weak for several months. When spring came, her sister, after whom the new baby had been named, offered to help by taking two-year-old Emily to her home in the town of Monson, about 20 miles away from Amherst. The journey took a long time in those days and grew frightening when a severe thunderstorm erupted about halfway through the trip. They were in the middle of a pine forest, and aunt and niece were both scared. Emily called the lightning "the fire" and asked to go home to her mother. But Aunt Lavinia managed to protect the little girl from much of the rain by covering her with her cloak. They made it to Monson that night.

Aunt Lavinia found little Emily to be "a very good child." She took her to church, where she behaved well, and to visit her maternal grandparents, who were pleasantly amused by her. She sewed a gingham apron for her niece to wear. And, according to Aunt Lavinia, Emily enjoyed her long visit very much; she "is perfectly well and contented," Lavinia wrote to her sister, adding that Emily had learned to play the piano—"she calls it the *moosic*"—and other than talking sometimes about big brother Austin, she "does not moan for any of you."

Perhaps Emily was content because she had older cousins for playmates at the house in Monson—William, who was 10, and another Emily, who was 4. They were the children of her Uncle Hiram, her mother and Aunt Lavinia's brother who had recently died of consumption (a disease of the lungs now known as tuberculosis), and his widow, Amanda, who was now suffering from the disease. Besides caring for her young nieces and nephew, Aunt Lavinia was busy nursing her sister-in-law, Amanda, during Emily's visit.

Not yet three years old, Emily lived in the atmosphere of

illness and death that filled the house. While she most likely didn't understand exactly what had happened to her late uncle, or why Aunt Lavinia sometimes seemed sad and worried, she would surely have absorbed the anxiety and grief that surrounded her.

The visit lasted about a month, and when it was time for Emily to return to Amherst, Aunt Lavinia found herself lonely without her sweet companion. Emily had left behind the gingham apron, and when Aunt Lavinia found it, she wanted to cry.

Soon after Emily's return, her grandparents left Amherst. Their departure was felt keenly not only by Edward's family—Emily and Austin had lived with their grandparents for all of their short lives—but also by the entire town. Samuel had been a prominent though not wealthy member of Amherst society. He had served his community as a landowner, lawyer, and political representative. A firm believer in educating girls as well as boys (a radical view in that time), he had helped found Amherst Academy, a coeducational school, in 1814. He went on to help establish Amherst College, which opened in 1821.

But his zeal for these institutions was expensive. He had given so much money to the college that by 1833 he had run out of funds and had to sell the Homestead. He was offered a job in Cincinnati, Ohio, and moved there with Lucretia and their two youngest daughters. Emily never saw her grandfather again. Edward rented half of the Homestead from the new owners, the Macks, so his family—including his youngest brother, Frederick—could continue to live there.

It was from the Homestead, then, that four-and-a-half-year-old Emily—with big brother Austin as her protective companion—left for her first day of school in September 1835. The primary

school was a two-story whitewashed brick building, about half a mile from the Homestead. The education provided was far from stimulating. Over the five years Emily attended the school, she learned only the basics: reading, writing, and simple arithmetic.

When the weather was cold or stormy, or the ground deep with mud, as it often could be in western Massachusetts, her parents kept Emily home. If it was terribly bad, they kept Austin home, too. But he was a boy, stronger and older, so they were more worried about Emily's health than his. And even though the Dickinsons believed firmly in education for girls, in Edward's mind, Austin's education was more important than his sister's. Away on one of his frequent business trips, Edward wrote to his older daughter, "You must not go to school, when it is cold, or bad going—You must be very careful, & not get sick."

An 1845 silhouette of the Dickinson family; from left: mother Emily, Vinnie, Austin, Emily, and father Edward.

In the mid-1800s, illness was frightening, especially when it

hit children. Many of the Dickinsons' friends and relatives had lost their children to diseases that began with a simple cough or a rash. Fearful, Edward liked to order his family to bedrest at the slightest sign of sickness. If any of them grew ill while he was away, he rushed home.

Her father's concern meant that Emily spent nearly as much time learning at home as at school. When she was seven years old, her father advised her in a letter to "keep school, & not disturb Mother" and to "learn, so as to tell me, when I come home, how many new things you have learned since I came away."

"Keeping school" meant doing her lessons at home. She was to learn things by memorization so she could recite them upon his return. And although Emily wasn't supposed to disturb her, her mother sometimes sat with her and oversaw her schoolwork, especially the written parts.

Emily's father, Edward Dickinson.

Edward also regularly admonished the children not to cause their mother any trouble or anxiety. He worried a lot about his wife, who was not only shy and quiet but also often nervous. She was a hardworking, frugal housekeeper, preferring not to pay for a servant but to do all the housework herself. The house was always spotless. She was an excellent cook and a devoted gardener. She grew roses and figs—especially difficult in that climate—that were the talk of the town.

As in many New England households in the mid-1800s, father ruled in the Dickinson home. When Edward was home, he began every day by reading the Bible to the family. Then he led them in prayer. The children were expected to obey their parents without question. In a letter Edward wrote them while on another business trip, he expressed how happy their good

behavior made him: “My Dear little Children, Your mother writes me that you have been quite good since I came away.—You don’t know what a pleasure it is for me to have such good news from you—I want to have you do perfectly right—always be kind & pleasant, & always tell the truth, & never deceive.”

Years later, Emily may have been remembering how constricted she felt by the expectation to always be well behaved when she wrote a poem that began like this: “They shut me up in Prose - / As when a little Girl / They put me in the Closet - / Because they liked me ‘still’ -.”

It’s doubtful that she was literally shut up in a closet. But sometimes she felt that her naturally playful and lively spirit had to be locked away.

At age 21, though, she remembered in letters to friends how much she had enjoyed the freedoms of childhood. To one she wrote that she yearned to “ramble away as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many years and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again.” When she was 22, she wrote to Austin that she wished they could do the “things we did when children,” adding, “I wish we were children now.”

Emily's mother, also named Emily.

Things she liked to do included the squishy joy of wading in the mud. Once she lost one of her shoes in the mud and arrived home barefoot. Her mother didn't scold or punish her as she usually did when Emily was too loud or misbehaved. This time, Emily remembered, her mother merely "frowned with a smile"—probably because Emily had also been looking for flowers as she waded.

She, along with Austin and Vinnie, loved to read. There weren't many books or magazines published for children in the 1830s, but when Emily was six, Edward arranged for them to receive the *Sabbath School Visitor* every month. Meant to inspire young readers to love and fear God and to lead a good and moral life, it was edited by Emily's uncle, Asa Bullard. Every month the

Sabbath School Visitor included a (probably fictional) story about the harrowing death of an innocent God-loving child. There was Frederick, who fell into a barrel of boiling water at the age of three and, just before dying, turned over his last 60 cents to religious missionaries. Another month, devout Abigail died of an enlarged heart. Two issues were devoted to four-year-old Charles, who went blind and then died a painful death, all without a word of complaint.

Happily, Edward's next magazine subscription for his children was a little lighter in tone. When Emily was seven, the monthly *Parley's Magazine* began to arrive in the Dickinson home. Also published for children, each issue of *Parley's* offered material on travel, biography, history, poetry, moral tales, and puzzles, including rhymed riddles or other brainteasers.

Although Emily was an avid reader at a young age, she was not inspired to write poetry or anything else during her childhood. Until she was nine years old, her life centered around the Homestead, playing with her siblings, pleasing her father, and not worrying her mother. The religion she took for granted in her very youngest years began to seem increasingly mysterious: the Bible verses she heard in church, the hymns the congregation sang, the daily readings her father presented to the family, the stories in the *Sabbath School Visitor*—all made a strong impression on thoughtful Emily.

2

A Beloved School with Beloved Friends

When Emily was nine, her father decided it was time for his family to have an entire house to themselves. His law practice was doing well; the Dickinsons did not have to worry about money. In the spring of 1840 he bought a large home on West Street, not far from the Homestead. It sat on more than two acres of land bordering Amherst's cemetery, which could be seen from the rear windows on the second floor. There was room for a garden, an orchard, and grapevines, and Austin even planted a small grove of pine trees.

The children often walked with their mother in the nearby woods, looking for wildflowers and other natural treasures. They discovered yellow lady's slippers, white Indian pipes, pink-and-white trillium, and climbing fern. As she grew older, Emily became known for her gardening skills, but wildflowers—especially small ones—were always her favorites. By the time she was a teenager, there was hardly one she couldn't identify.

Early in 1840 a traveling portrait painter, Otis A. Bullard (no relation to Emily's uncle Asa), arrived in Amherst. Edward liked the idea of having permanent images of his family. He hired Bullard to paint individual portraits of himself and his wife and one of their three children together. For the sitting, Austin, Emily, and Vinnie put on their good clothes—a black white-collared suit for Austin and white-lace-trimmed dresses for the girls (dark green for Emily, silvery-blue for Vinnie). The painter gave Emily an open book with a rose laid on its pages to hold.

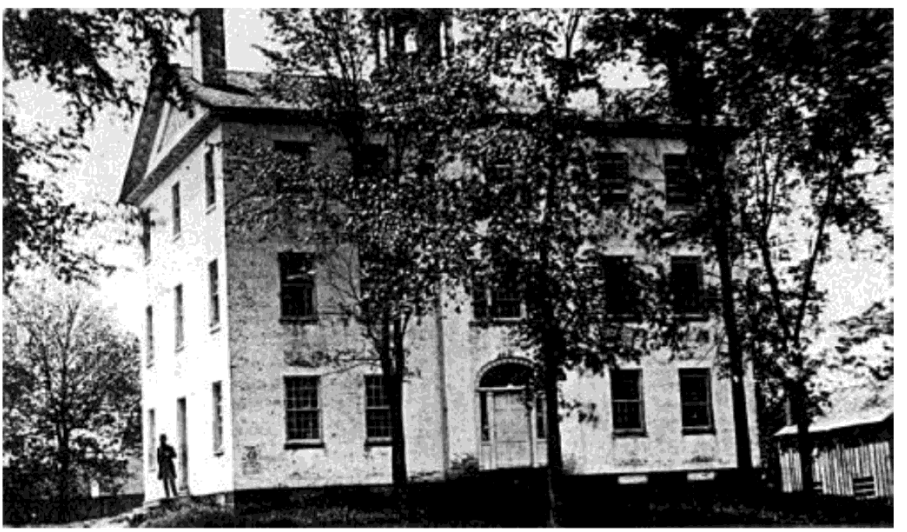
The Amherst home where the Dickinsons lived from 1840 to 1855.

This portrait of the three Dickinson children—from left: Emily, Austin, and Vinnie—was painted in 1840.

That autumn, Emily and Vinnie enrolled at Amherst Academy, which Austin was already attending. A three-story brick building, it was an enormous leap from the school Emily had attended for the previous five years. She loved her seven years at Amherst Academy. The remarkable school, which had begun accepting girls only two years earlier, had an open-

minded curriculum that included a strong emphasis on the sciences. The level of studies was exceptional. Students were even allowed to attend science lectures at nearby Amherst College. The teachers were young and passionate. Many of them had just graduated from the college. Friendships between students and teachers were encouraged.

Emily was one of about 100 female students. It was at Amherst Academy that she first began to be recognized for her original and inventive writing. A teacher later described her as "very bright, but rather delicate and frail looking." He called her an excellent scholar, whose compositions "in both thought and style seemed beyond her years, and always attracted much attention in the school and, I am afraid, excited not a little envy." One older classmate recalled that Emily and another girl were "the wits of the school." Another one remembered Emily often surrounded by girls at recess, listening with fascination to the funny, peculiar stories she was making up on the spot.



Amherst Academy.

Emily's schoolmates were able to admire her writing because Amherst Academy held regular essay competitions. Every other Wednesday the entire student body gathered in a large hall on the third floor to listen to each other recite their original compositions. (A sign of the school's progressive thinking was that girls were encouraged to express themselves through reciting their words aloud. In that time, women were generally discouraged from public speaking.)

Some of the girls also occasionally produced a publication they called "Forest Leaves." The pages were passed around the school, and each student who wanted to contribute wrote her piece in script. Emily's small, precise handwriting was always recognizable.

Emily's classes included Latin, which she studied for at least three years. Even though she and her good friend Abby Wood scribbled notes to each other in the Latin textbook they shared, the poetry she later wrote shows that she learned the ancient language well. She also studied history, algebra, geometry, and several sciences, including botany and geology.

Amherst Academy was so well regarded that families from distant towns often sent their daughters there. The girls would board with Amherst families while attending school. One of these girls, Jane Humphrey from Southwick, 35 miles away, lived with the Dickinsons for a few months. Jane was a year older than Emily, and the two grew close. On spring afternoons, when the school day was done, they sat together in the Dickinsons' front doorway and listened to the birds chirping in the cherry trees and a farmer chopping down a tree in the nearby woods. Sometimes the rustle of one of their dresses frightened the birds away. At night they jumped, giggling, into the bed they shared.

In the spring of 1842, the close Dickinson family life was

interrupted by Edward's decision to send Austin, just 13 years old, away to school. The newly formed Williston Seminary in Easthampton already had a reputation as an even more demanding school than Amherst Academy. It was less than 15 miles away from Amherst, but any distance seemed too far to Emily and her siblings; it was the first time since Emily's visit with Aunt Lavinia that they had been separated. Emily missed Austin terribly from the start.

One of the first letters she ever wrote was to Austin, only a few weeks after his departure. "You cannot think how odd it seems without you there was always such a Hurrah wherever you was," she lamented. In between sharing news about the hens and their egg-laying and neighborhood affairs, she pleaded, "you must write oftener to us." Other than numerous marks—like periods in midair—separating some of her thoughts, her letter includes no punctuation.

The days were quieter without Austin, but life went on. Emily counted the eggs the hens produced daily and worried about Austin's favorite rooster. Their other two roosters liked to gang up on him, and she worried that they would eventually kill him. It didn't help her spirits that spring always came late to western Massachusetts. Not until the first days of May could Emily write Austin that the trees were finally full of blossoms.

As if it weren't bad enough that Austin was gone, Jane had left Amherst, too. Although she had other friends, Emily missed Jane. She wrote not only to her brother but to her friend as well, entertaining Jane with local gossip. One of their friends had received a gold ring from a boy they knew. Emily's plants were growing beautifully. The other roosters had finally succeeded in killing Austin's favorite.

In the letter to Jane, Emily's blossoming wit comes through

in her description of a classmate reciting his composition about the importance of thinking twice before speaking. Emily concluded that "he is the sillyest creature that ever lived I think. I told him that I thought he had better think twice before he spoke." But the stories and jokes are framed by her longing for her friend: "I miss you more and more every day, in my study in play at home indeed every where I miss my beloved Jane—." The letter to Jane was the first of many Emily would write to her friends throughout her life, expressing intense emotions for them while cleverly weaving in anecdotes, descriptions, and deep reflections.

In spite of missing Jane and Austin, Emily continued to thrive at school and in her community. The school day at Amherst Academy began and ended with prayer. Students were expected to attend church on Sunday as well as Bible class on Saturday evenings. Emily's family were prominent members of Amherst's First Congregationalist Church. For 12 years, week after week, Emily sat in the Dickinson family pew, listening to the young minister, Rev. Aaron Merrick Colton, preach and pray in bold, musical, but unadorned tones. When she began to write poems, they bore the evidence of Colton's stylistic influence.

In late April 1844, when Emily was 13, her second cousin Sophia Holland, who was two and a half years older and a close friend, grew ill with typhus, a very dangerous infectious disease. Emily was terribly distressed by Sophia's illness and spent as much time as she could by her bedside. She later described their closeness by saying "my thoughts & her own were the same."

As Sophia grew worse, she became delirious. Now Emily was forbidden to go into her room. She felt as though she herself would die if she couldn't see Sophia. Not until it was clear that Sophia was dying was Emily allowed to say goodbye to her

friend. She took off her shoes and silently entered the room. She described the experience a few years later in a letter: "There she lay mild & beautiful as in health & her pale features lit up with an unearthly—smile. I looked as long as friends would permit & when they told me I must look no longer I let them lead me away. I shed no tear, for my heart was too full to weep, but after she was laid in her coffin … I gave way to a fixed melancholy."

While Emily didn't talk about her grief at losing Sophia, she fell into a depression that was obvious to her family and worried them. Her parents decided to send her to visit Aunt Lavinia, who was now married with a small daughter and living in Boston. The month with Aunt Lavinia and her two-year-old cousin Louisa—Emily called her Loo—helped lift her spirits.

On the way home from Boston, Emily stopped for a few days in Worcester with her uncle William, her father's brother. At Uncle William's she received another lift to her spirits when a letter from her father arrived. He wrote, "Tell Uncle Wm. that I want a Piano when he can buy good ones, at a fair price." Emily had long been wishing for a piano. Even though it would be nearly a year before a piano arrived in the Dickinson household, the prospect of it made her very happy.

Emily returned to Amherst on a Wednesday in early June, just in time for the essay recitations at school. She had missed the final weeks of the spring term and the first two weeks of the summer session. During her absence, a new girl had enrolled at Amherst Academy. Emily first saw her on the staircase going up to the third floor. She noticed her immediately because the girl wore dandelions in her hair. Emily was intrigued.

She quickly befriended the girl, who was Abiah Root from Feeding Hills, a small village near Springfield, about 25 miles south of Amherst. Abiah was staying with cousins while

attending Amherst Academy. She was, to Emily's fascination, working on a novel. She and Emily formed a close circle of friends with three other girls. Emily called them "the five."

The fall term at school was a joyful one for Emily. Not only did she revel in her friendships with the five, but she and her friends also adored their teacher, Elizabeth Adams, who had come from Syracuse, New York, the previous December. Sunday evenings Emily went to singing school. Austin had returned to Williston Seminary, but her friends and her beloved teacher made his absence a little easier to bear. By spring, however, the circle of five began to fall apart.

3

Science, Nature, and Religion

Abiah Root was the first of the five to leave Amherst. By early 1845 she was back in Springfield, attending Mary B. Campbell's school for girls. She gave Emily a lock of her hair as a remembrance, and Emily treasured it. The two kept up their friendship through letters, Emily's full of gossipy news about friends and family. She was eager to read Abiah's novel, she wrote, and was still going to singing school Sunday evenings.

Late February brought unusually mild weather to Amherst, and Emily rejoiced that her plants thrived. By now her mother had taught her a great deal about gardening, and it was

becoming one of her greatest passions. She wrote to Abiah that "it seems more like smiling May crowned with flowers than cold, arctic February, wading through snowdrifts…. My plants look beautifully. Old King Frost has not had the pleasure of snatching any of them in his cold embrace as yet, and I hope will not." Whether she realized it or not, Emily was already using literary devices, such as describing frost as a person, to add life to her writing.

Years later she would write a poem about fighting back against the oncoming cold weather that continued this personification. The first two verses read:

> The Frost of Death was on the Pane -
> "Secure your Flower" said he.
> Like Sailors fighting with a Leak
> We fought Mortality -
>
> Our passive Flower we held to Sea -
> To mountain - to the Sun -
> Yet even on his Scarlet shelf
> To crawl the Frost begun -

Emily's great love of plants and flowers was enhanced by her botany studies at Amherst Academy. Her textbook, *Familiar Lectures on Botany*, was written by Almira Hart Lincoln in 1829 and was very popular in schools. From this book Emily learned the structure and patterns of different kinds of plants and their Latin names. Lincoln wanted her readers to understand her belief that the beauties of nature reflect the workings of God. She criticized those who "admire the gifts, while they forget the giver." She dedicated her book to the Divine Purpose, as God was often referred to in those times.

Lincoln's approach to the study of botany as a reflection of

God's goodness was echoed in most of the subjects being taught at that time. Science and religion (namely, Christianity) were not seen as conflicting; rather science was seen as proof of religion. Studying the sciences was considered a way of learning and better understanding God's creations.

This belief in the important relationship between science and religion was also the foundation of the geology lectures Emily attended at Amherst College that year. Presented by the college's president, the well-known scientist Edward Hitchcock, the lectures inspired the entire Amherst community and probably greatly influenced Emily's intellectual development. Like Lincoln's botany textbook, Hitchcock's lectures focused on accurate scientific knowledge of the natural world as a way of appreciating the magnificence of the God who created it, according to religious teachings. Other girls her age in New England may have been attending finishing schools to perfect their needlepoint and dancing, but Emily was learning the chemistry behind the colorful autumn foliage.

Learning science was not limited to the classroom or lecture hall. Emily also took part in nature walks on which students identified plants and flowers, pointing out their specific characteristics. On these walks, students gathered specimens, which they dried, pressed, and labeled in blank books they called herbariums. Emily began her herbarium that spring of 1845. Over time she would collect and preserve more than 400 plants and flowers in it.

Many of Emily's poems are filled with references to plants and flowers. When she wrote, "I pull a flower from the woods - / A monster with a glass / Computes the stamens in a breath - / And has her in a 'Class'!" she was referring to the system of classification that she was taught in botany lessons.

One day in early May, when Vinnie had gone to Boston for a two-week trip with their father, Emily went out alone to pick wildflowers and marvel at the beautiful spring trees covered with fragrant blossoms. Later that day she wrote Abiah about her herbarium, enclosing a geranium leaf as encouragement for Abiah to create her own. "'Most all the girls are making ones," she told Abiah. "It would be such a treasure to you." She offered to send Abiah some local Amherst flowers.

Two girls of the five were still at school with Emily—she and Abby Wood worked together at a table. By now, though, another had left Amherst to attend school in Pittsfield. Dear Miss Adams was gone, too. Emily missed her two good friends and her teacher very much.

Emily continued to excel in her writing and jokingly bragged about it to Abiah: "I have written one composition this term, and I need not assure you it was exceedingly edifying to myself as well as everybody else." Now 14 years old, she was also growing interested in her own appearance. "I am growing handsome very fast indeed!" she wrote flippantly to Abiah. "I expect I shall be the belle of Amherst when I reach my 17th year. I don't doubt that I shall have perfect crowds of admirers at that age."

An original page from Emily's herbarium: she labeled only one of the

specimens on this page.

When summer came, Emily, who was now wearing her hair up, the mark of a young woman, finally had her own piano and was delighted to be taking lessons. Her aunt Selby was staying with the family and was her teacher. They used an instruction book by the French classical composer, pianist, and teacher Henri Bertini, which was popular at the time. (Abiah used it as well.)

The school summer term was 16 weeks long, and Emily's days were crowded with classes, music lessons, and tending to her garden as well as her house plants. She was trying to squeeze in time to make a bookmark—the design was an arrow encircled by a wreath—for one of her school friends, but it was going slowly. She did find time, though, to pick and press forget-me-nots for all her friends. She promised to send one to Abiah. In spite of Emily's worries about the upcoming school examination, she wrote her friend that "I never enjoyed myself more than I have this summer," praising their "delightful school" and "pleasant teachers."

By now only two of the five friends—Abby and Emily—were still attending Amherst Academy. They were both kept home from school during the fall term, however, due to poor health. The frailty that Emily often experienced as a child continued into her teenage years, often accompanied by a very bad cough. The summer had flown by for her. "I really think someone must have oiled his [time's] chariot wheels," she wrote, "for I don't recollect of hearing him pass, and I am sure I should if something had not prevented his chariot wheels from creaking as usual." (Again, she refers to time as a person, making easy use of this literary device to add interest to her observation.) Even with Abby to keep her company, her illness put her in a

downcast mood. Not until a long, affectionate letter from Abiah arrived did the mood lift.

However revived Emily may have felt, her parents did not think she was well enough to return to school. She was allowed to continue her piano lessons, though, and in late September her mother decided it was time to teach her eldest daughter to make bread. Her mother relied on the recipes in a book Edward had given her when they married: Lydia M. Child's *The Frugal Housewife*. One of the standards was Child's recipe for what was called Rye and Indian Bread. Rolling up her sleeves, plunging her hands into the cornmeal, rye, yeast, and water, Emily was delighted with the two loaves that she produced. Bread—and later, desserts—became her specialty.

Late September in western Massachusetts meant the beginning of cold weather, and Emily feared, as always, for her flowers. She had had an especially beautiful garden this past summer, but the flowers were nearly gone by the end of the month. Again, she wrote to Abiah about her enemy, the biting winter chill many people referred to as Jack Frost. "I mean to pick the prettiest ones before I go to bed, and cheat Jack Frost of so many of *the treasures* he calculates to rob to-night." She wished she could send Abiah a bouquet for Abiah to press and poetically label as "the last flowers of summer."

By December Jack Frost had definitely won the battle of the flowers, but a lot of Emily's time was taken up by the large number of indoor plants she cared for. She also practiced piano for two hours a day and continued to take lessons. While her parents didn't think she was strong enough to return to school, they did allow her to attend German classes, which were taught by the principal of Amherst Academy, Stephen Coleman. (His daughters Eliza and the older Olivia were friends of Emily's.) It

was unusual to have a course in German in Amherst, and Edward thought this might be Emily's only chance to study the language.

On Christmas Eve, Emily hung up her stocking on the bedpost, as usual. Protestant New Englanders in the mid-1800s didn't consider Christmas a very important holiday; they had begun to observe it with any degree of celebration only 100 years earlier. In fact, Emily's Puritan ancestors had been banned from even recognizing December 25 as a holiday, and the only Christmas tradition the Dickinsons observed was stockings for the children. When Emily woke up Christmas morning, she was pleased to find that her stocking held, among other things, perfume, a sheet of music, pin cushions, needle-books, and lots of candy.

The start of the new year made Emily gloomy for some reason she couldn't understand. She hadn't heard from any of her three departed friends for too long and missed them. Even though new girls her age had come to Amherst that winter and Emily befriended them, she would have rather had her three old friends "back than all the new comers," she wrote Abiah. She and Abby were still keeping each other company, as neither was yet allowed to return to school.

When Abiah wrote back, her letter was more serious than Emily's. She confided that she had been having deep inner struggles about religion. While going to church, praying, and reading the Bible were a part of daily life for most New England families, it was generally believed that in order to become a full member of the church, one had to publicly proclaim one's belief in Christ. Abiah had recently been considering making such a pronouncement. But did she truly feel she could give her heart to Christ?

Abiah Root, one of Emily's earliest correspondents, about 1847.

Emily delayed writing back, not wanting to influence Abiah's decision. She showed the letter to Abby, and the two pored over it. When Emily did respond to Abiah, she mused at length about her own struggles with the same question: "I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ…. There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill." She wrote about death and eternity and about her wish that she could give herself over, but "Evil voices lisp in my ear—There is yet time enough."

She described a local revival of the previous winter, in which people of all ages had crowded church meetings and made their proclamations about accepting Christ. Intrigued as she was, she couldn't bring herself to attend. She didn't trust herself not to get

swept up in the excitement. She was afraid she might speak out before she had wholeheartedly made her decision. But she scolded herself for this reluctance: "How ungrateful I am to live along day by day upon Christs bounty and still be in a state of enmity to him & his cause."

Less than two months later, Abiah had made her decision for Christ. When Emily read her letter, she cried and wished that she could have the same certainty. Another of the five friends had also made that decision. Distraught, Emily sat down at her little writing desk and again poured out her yearnings to Abiah. She felt that she had once, briefly, experienced the personal love of God, and the memory of those sweet moments tortured her: "I think of the perfect happiness I experienced while I felt I was an heir of heaven as of a delightful dream, out of which the Evil one bid me wake & again return to the world & its pleasures." She stopped praying and attending her prayer circle. Friends tried to convince her to return, but she felt her heart had grown too hard and distant from God to do so.

It is hard to fully understand the depths of struggle that Emily must have had with her inner self. She wrote to Abiah with such passion about loving God and wanting to serve him, and yet she could not betray the tiny deep part of herself that resisted this joy. At 15, Emily was developing her singular character; the insistence to live in her own complete truth was becoming her hallmark.

4

Higher Education

In the spring of 1846, Emily and Abby were waiting eagerly for a promised visit from Abiah. They planned that she would share her time between their two homes. When their friend, Abiah's cousin, traveled to the small town of Feeding Hills, where Abiah lived, they warned the girl not to return to Amherst without Abiah. When she returned alone—with no explanation except that Abiah could not come—Emily and Abby would barely speak to her.

A bright note was the return of Miss Adams, who was again teaching at Amherst Academy. In the summer, both Abby and