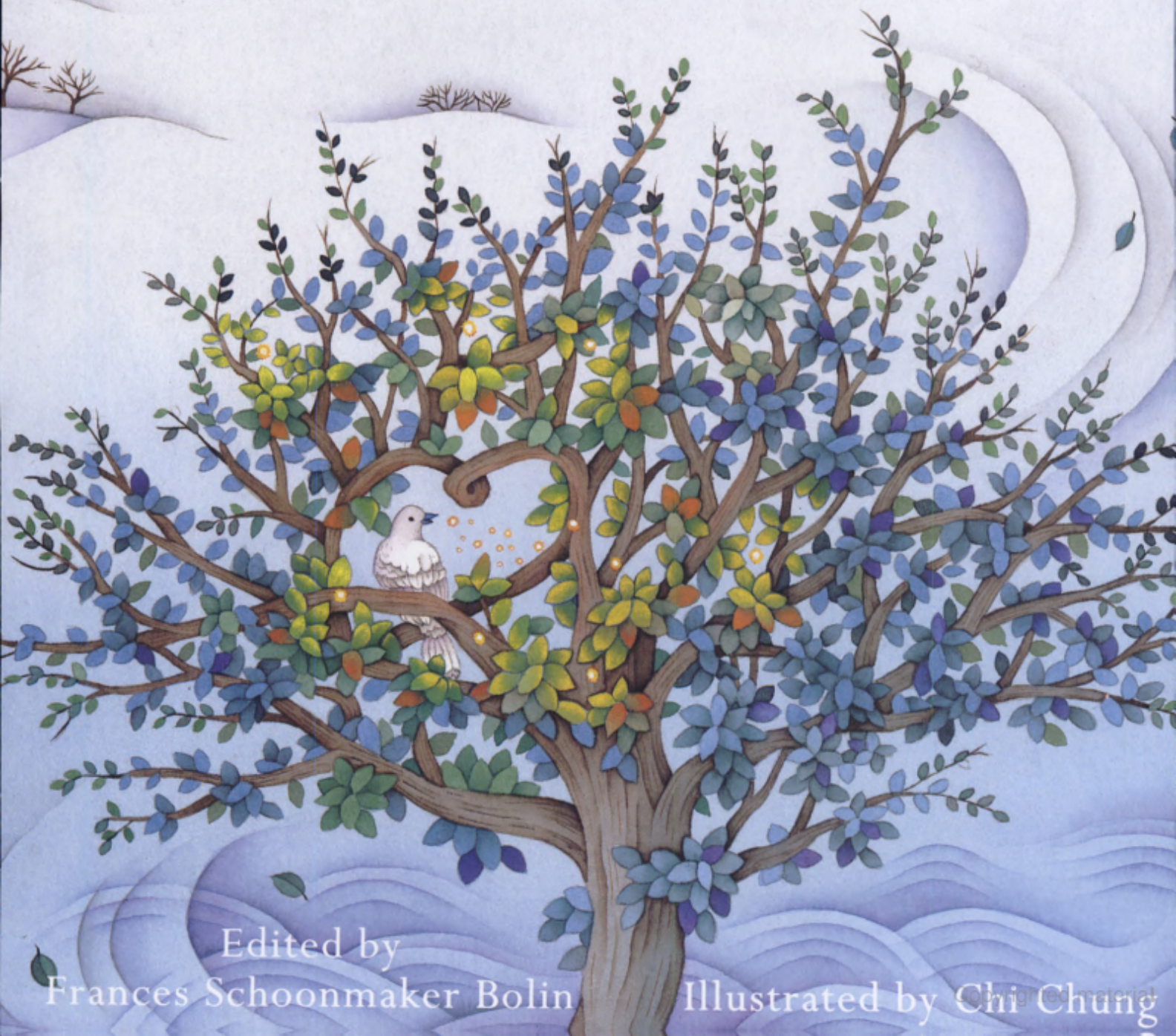
Poetry for Young People

Emily Dickinson



Edited by
Frances Schoonmaker Bolin

Illustrated by Chi Chung

Poetry for Young People

Emily Dickinson

Edited by Frances Schoonmaker Bolin
Illustrated by Chi Chung

Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.
New York

Dedication

To my mother
Aleene Elizabeth Shannon Schoonmaker

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Nancy D. Lewis and Dorothy Lewis for their many suggestions, and to Mary Sullivan for her assistance.

A MAGNOLIA EDITIONS BOOK

Editors: Karla Olson, Loretta Mowat
Art Director/Designer: Jeff Batzli
Production Manager: Jeanne E. Kaufman

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886.
[Poems. Selections]
Emily Dickinson : poetry for young people / edited by Frances S. Bolin ; illustrated by Chi Chung.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8069-0635-9
1. Children's poetry, American. [1. American poetry.] I. Bolin. Frances S. II. Chung. Chi, ill. III. Title.
PS1541. A1 1994
811'.4--dc20 94-13809
CIP
AC

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16

Published by Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.
387 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016

Distributed in Canada by Sterling Publishing,
c/o Canadian Manda Group, 165 Dufferin Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6K 3H6
Distributed in Great Britain and Europe by Chris Lloyd at Orca Book Services, Stanley House, Fleets Lane, Poole BH15 3AJ England
Distributed in Australia by Capricorn Link (Australia) Pty Ltd.
P.O. Box 704, Windsor, NSW 2756 Australia

"I dwell in Possibility," from THE COMPLETE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Copyright 1929 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi: Copyright renewed 1957 by Mary L. Hampson. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown and Company.

"Bee, I'm expecting you!" and "A soft sea washed around the house" from BOLTS OF MELODY:New Poems of Emily Dickinson by Millicent Todd Bingham. Copyright 1945 by Millicent Todd Bingham. Copyright renewed 1973 by Katherine Loomis and George Loomis II. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Printed in China

Sterling ISBN 0-8069-0635-9

Contents

Introduction 4

Hope is the thing with feathers 8

It's all I have to bring today 9

I started early, took my dog 11

I'm nobody! Who are you? 12

I hide myself within my flower 14

I dwell in Possibility 14

Will there really be a morning? 15

I'll tell you how the sun rose 16

She sweeps with many-colored brooms 17

I know some lonely houses off the road 18

The moon was but a chin of gold 20

Pink, small, and punctual 21

His bill an auger is 22

An everywhere of silver 23

I like to see it lap the miles 24

A fuzzy fellow without feet 26

It sifts from leaden sieves 27

A narrow fellow in the grass 29

Dear March, come in! 30

Bee, I'm expecting you! 31

The grass so little has to do 32

A bird came down the walk 33

The bee is not afraid of me 34

A soft sea washed around the house 36

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee 36

The pedigree of honey 37

Forbidden fruit a flavor has 37

The wind begun to rock the grass 39

The morns are meeker than they were 40

I have not told my garden yet 41

My river runs to thee 42

I never saw a moor 43

There is no frigate like a book 44

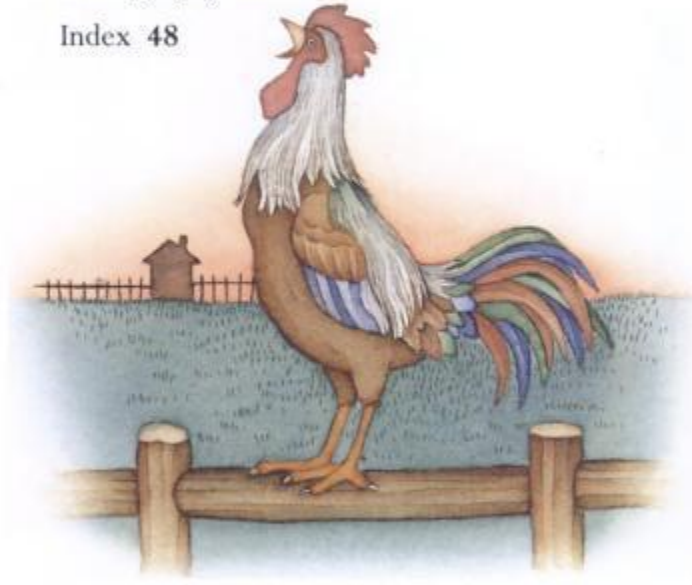
If I can stop one heart from breaking 46

A word is dead 47

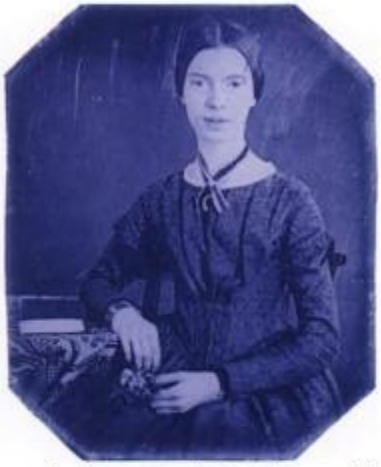
In this short life 47

Bibliography 48

Index 48



Introduction



"HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS," WROTE EMILY DICKINSON. SHE wrote about hope, as well as flowers, birds, people, life, and death—ordinary things. But she had such a vivid imagination that she seemed to get inside these things and look at them in a new way.

Because she had imagination, Emily could write about places she had never been and things she had never seen. Once she wrote (see page 43):

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea,
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

In her mind, Emily could walk her dog, Carlo, along a little path, and visit—not the neighbors, but the sea. Sailing ships, or frigates, were on the upper floor and mermaids came up from the basement, as if the sea were a big house. The sea acted as if it would eat her up. It filled her shoes and followed her all the way to town (see page 11). In her imagintion, Emily travelled all over the world.

When Emily was a girl, almost everyone in Amherst, Massachusetts, knew the Dickinsons. Her grandfather helped to found Amherst College, and her father, Edward, a lawyer, was the treasurer of the college. Edward was a very proper and religious man. Every morning and evening, he read to the family from the Bible and led them in prayer. Every Sunday the family went to the Congregational church. Edward Dickinson also served as United States congressman from Massachusetts for a short time. He was so well known that people called him "Squire" Dickinson.

Emily's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, was known for her fine cooking. Austin, Emily's brother, was three years older and known for being very bright. He became a lawyer and the treasurer of Amherst College, just like his father. Her sister, Lavinia, whom everyone called Vinnie, was known to be outspoken and witty. She was also much prettier than Emily.

In such an important family, Emily may have seemed to some like a real "nobody." But inside she knew she was somebody special. She played with this thought in "I'm nobody! Who are you?" (see page 12) and at another time told her brother that "bigness" does not come from outside a person, but is something inside.

In many ways, Emily was much like other girls. She enjoyed simple pleasures, such as parties and social and church activities. She liked to gather flowers in the hills with friends, and collected and pressed the flowers. (Once she told her brother that she knew where all the best flowers were, as if each had a house number.) She kept the family garden and loved to plant wildflowers along with the garden flowers. With such ordinary ways, no one suspected that one day she would be the most famous person from Amherst.

Emily loved school, but when she was old enough to attend Amherst Academy, she felt too shy to go alone. She begged her parents to let Vinnie go, too, although Vinnie was much younger. Emily argued that she had been teaching Vinnie to read and that Vinnie was better at arithmetic than she was.

Emily never outgrew this shyness. She was shy around strangers, but when she got to know them, she was witty and fun to be with. People who knew her were also able to accept the odd things she sometimes did, such as the time when she hid from a train. Her father had worked to get the railroad to build a track through Amherst, and everyone in town was excited to see the train make its first trip. Emily, however, hid in the woods where she could watch without being seen!

Perhaps Emily got some of her odd and unpredictable ways, as well as her vision of ordinary things as beautiful and wonderful, from her father. Edward once rang the church bells to call everyone in town out to see a spectacular sunset. No one could have imagined the dignified Edward Dickinson doing such a thing.

Emily began to write poetry when she was in her teens. Nobody in her family was especially interested in writing. But Emily wrote anyway, jotting little notes and verses, particularly Valentine messages. At seventeen, Emily went away to Mount Holyoke Seminary for a year. She was very homesick and wrote many letters home. Austin wrote her back and his letters always cheered her.

It was Austin who wrote Emily about Benjamin Newton, a law student studying with her father. When Emily returned home, she and Ben became good friends, discussing books that Ben loaned to her. Emily's father did not approve of Ben's books, for he felt they contained too many new, liberal ideas. So, to avoid arguments, Ben hid the books in the bushes near the front door when he came to call, and later Emily or Austin collected them.

When Ben left Amherst, he and Emily wrote to each other. Ben was one of the few people who showed an interest in Emily's poetry. He wrote in her autograph album, "All can write autographs, but few paragraphs...."

Not many years later, Benjamin died. Emily was so shocked and sad that she could hardly believe it was true. Sometime later, she began to write poems about death, a part of life that Emily wondered and wrote about for the rest of her life. In "I have not told my garden yet" (see page 41), she imagines her own death.

In Emily's time, people thought that marriage offered the best prospects for a woman. Many young men enjoyed Emily's and Vinnie's company, but neither of the sisters ever married. Some people thought that Emily was too free-spirited to marry.

Austin got married and built a house next door. But unmarried young women generally lived at home in those days. Emily continued to tend the garden and became a good cook, like her mother. Her father refused to eat bread baked by anyone else. But Emily hated housecleaning, so Vinnie performed those tasks and left the kitchen to Emily.

In the evenings, Emily practiced the piano or read. Her nose was in a book almost every spare moment. She often said that books were the best company. A book can "take us lands away," she wrote (see page 44).

Emily continued to be very shy. As she grew older, she began to spend less and less time in town, and by the time she was forty, she almost never left home. The only place she went was next door to see Austin and his wife, Sue, always by the little path through the backyard. She hardly saw anyone except her family and some neighborhood children. When friends and neighbors came to call she stayed in her room upstairs. But she always kept her door open so she could hear what was going on. It was around this time that she started to wear only white.

The more Emily stayed by herself, the more curious people in town became about her. Some made up stories about Emily to explain her odd ways. Others came to the door with little gifts just to see if they could get a glimpse of Emily. But Emily saw only those she chose to see. Vinnie always talked to visitors, but protected Emily from the curious. The family did not understand Emily's need to be away from the world, but they respected her wishes.

Her nieces and nephews and the neighborhood children didn't seem to mind that Emily was different. They loved to play in her yard. Sometimes she worked in the garden and watched them from there or the window. When Emily waved her arms to signal, play stopped. Then she would open the window and lower a basket, filled with warm gingerbread, cookies, or raisins, by a knotted cord. Her nephew Ned called Emily his best friend. And once, when her niece, Mattie, was angry with a playmate, Mattie yelled the worst thing she could think of: "You haven't got an Aunt Emily!"

Over the years Emily taught herself to write poetry by writing and writing and writing. After most people had gone to bed, Emily sat up writing. Emily wrote extraordinary things; she lived "in Possibility." Sunrises, sunsets, the moon, shadows on the lawn, storms, and bees were in her poems. But the sun didn't just rise; it rose "a ribbon at a time." The moon could show "a chin of gold," or slide down a chair. A sunset wasn't just pretty colors; it was a woman sweeping with many brooms, each a different color that left a few shreds, or straws, behind. Hills could untie bonnets. With Emily's imagination, lightning displayed a yellow beak and ugly blue claws. A maple tree wore a gay scarf. Birds didn't fly; they unrolled their feathers and rowed home. Her poems about flowers, butterflies, and bees reveal the delight she took in nature and her keen sense of the funny side of things. A good example is her letter from Fly to Bee (see page 31).

Only six of Emily's poems were published while she was alive. Her poems were unusual, not what people seemed to like at the time. Poetry in those days was serious and often used "flowery" language. Emily's was light and witty.

She almost always wrote in a rhythm or meter called iambic. It is supposed to be most like ordinary speech, and is the rhythm used in many of the hymns Emily sang in church. A short syllable is followed by a long one. You can usually clap the rhythm of her poems. The first clap is soft, or weak, and the second loud, or strong. Turn to the poem on page 20 and try it.

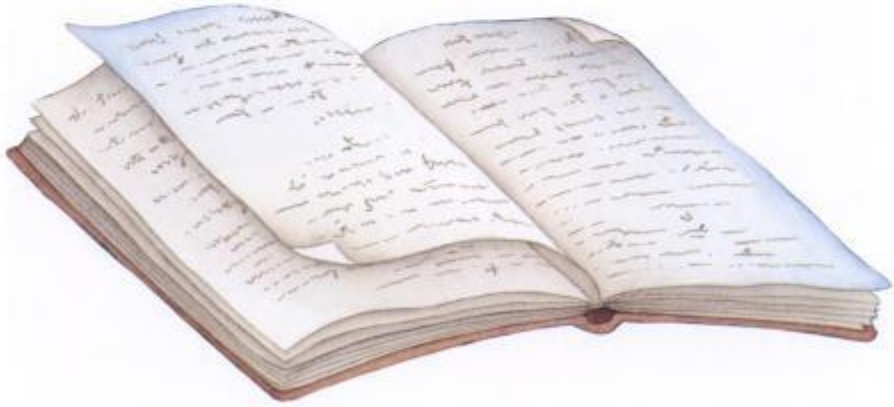
Her poems often have stanzas of four lines. In these poems, lines one and three have eight syllables, lines two and four have six syllables, and the last word in line two rhymes with the last word in line four. For an example, see the poem on page 34 entitled "The bee is not afraid of me." Most of her poems have two stanzas, but sometimes there are more; in these poems, each stanza follows the pattern set in the first stanza.

Writing a poem according to these rules is like working out a puzzle. Emily would think of what she wanted to say, then work until it fit the pattern. She always kept a dictionary beside her so she could find a word that would say exactly what she wanted. Many times she marked through a word and replaced it with another. Sometimes she broke the "rules" to include a word that didn't quite fit or to play with an idea in a different way. People were shocked by this, for it was not what they expected.

Almost every evening, Emily sent a note, and often a poem, to Austin's wife, Sue, such as "The morns are meeker than they were" on page 40. Like Ben Newton, Sue was interested in Emily's poetry, although not even Sue knew how much Emily had written. After Emily died at age fifty-five, Vinnie went into her room. To Vinnie's great surprise, she found in the bottom drawer of Emily's bureau a box of little books, each sewn together by hand. There were 879 poems in the little books. Later, more poems were found, for odd little Emily had written more than seventeen hundred poems!

Why did she write? We may never know for certain. But we do know this; Emily Dickinson chose to spend day after day in the same house, doing the same things—ordinary, seemingly unimportant things—for she seemed to know that there are wonderful possibilities in the most ordinary life if we just take notice.

Emily wrote in a letter, "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else." Living, thinking, and imagining were a full-time job to Emily Dickinson. She believed that feelings are to be thought about, not put aside. Perhaps she wrote to capture what she noticed, what she imagined, and how she felt.



Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

gale—*a strong wind*
abash—*to astonish; to make feel ill at ease or self-conscious*
extremity—*a most difficult or dangerous time or situation*

Journey into the world of Emily Dickinson where ordinary things and occurrences are filled with magical charm and graceful beauty.

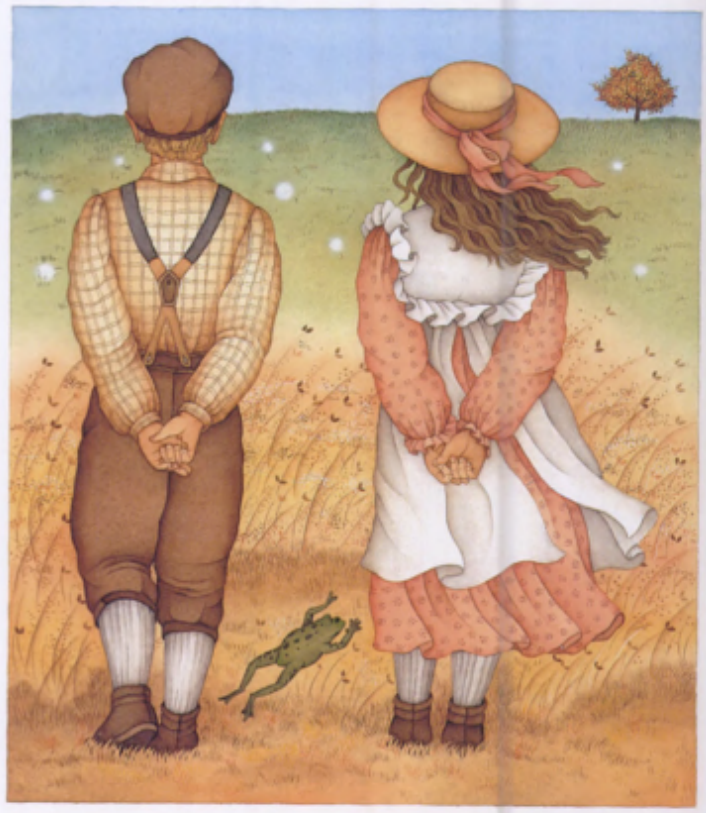
Watch a sunrise come to life in "She sweeps with many-colored brooms"

Sail to far-off places by reading, because after all "There is no frigate like a book"

Giggle at the plea of a fly as he writes "Bee, I'm expecting you!"

Feel the surprising warmth of snow when "It sifts from leaden sieves"

Delight in the hidden secrets of the everyday world. Insects, birds, animals, the grass, the sun and moon, trees, flowers, the sea, and even Emily Dickinson's thoughts about herself take on new personalities and become other things in more than thirty-five favorite poems, including "I like to see it lap the miles," "A fuzzy fellow without feet," "The wind begun to rock the grass," and "I never saw a moor." Stunning, full-color drawings capture each poem's mood, and definitions and commentary invite you to jump right into the poetry and vision of one of America's best-loved poets.



Bee, I'm expecting you!
Was saying yesterday
To somebody you know
That you were due.

The frogs got home last week,
Are settled and at work,
Birds mostly back,
The clover warm and thick.

You'll get my letter by
The seventeenth; reply,
Or better, be with me.
Yours,
Fly.

Sterling Publishing Company, Inc.

ISBN 0-8069-0635-9