Chapter 1

Life

> The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea – I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger!
>
> Emily Dickinson, letter to Abiah Root, 1850; *L* 104, no. 39

Emily Dickinson was wickedly funny, fiercely loyal, and bravely original. She was a poet before her time, an under-appreciated writer who experimented with poetry and stretched the limits of an unmarried woman's role long before the Modernist and feminist movements of the twentieth century. Although many historians have tried to label her, Dickinson's unusual life and original poetry defy easy categorization. Readers approaching her work for the first time are often surprised. Dickinson lived and wrote more than a hundred years ago, yet readers can identify with her as if she were living next door today. Although she knew "the shore is safer," Emily Dickinson threw her life and work into navigating the terrifying aspects of life and death, charting "the danger" for future generations.

Dickinson was a model for all women poets who followed – an example of eccentricity, autonomy, and rebellion. She lived in a society where women were generally expected to be dutiful rather than creative or productive, models of decorum rather than innovators, and above all wives and mothers. The time, the culture, and the odds were stacked against an intellectual, literary woman. Yet, Emily Dickinson used the resources of her family, home, and network of friends to shatter the narrow role society offered her and become one of the most influential American poets.

The Dickinson family

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small New England town where everyone knew everyone else's business. News traveled quickly by word of mouth at community gatherings, church services, funerals, and social visits, when people would "call upon" neighbors and friends. Dickinson and her neighbors knew intimate details about each other, including everything from who purchased a new calico or was wearing the latest fashion in hats to who was having a baby or an affair. Gossip spread through a tightly woven web of conversations and letters. In the following letter, the fourteen-year-old Dickinson demonstrates the gossipy nature of a teenager living in a very small, inter-connected town:

> I do not understand your hints in regard to Abby taking so much interest in Deacon Macks family. Now Sarah is absent, I take it William is the member of the family whom you allude to. But I did not know as Abby had any partiality for him. That William is a smart boy. However as you did not mean to insinuate I will make no more comments on him, except to add that I think he will make a devoted *husband.* Dont you. I am sorry that you are laying up Hattys sins against her. I think you had better heap coals of fire upon her head by writing to her constantly until you get an answer . . . I dont know about this Mr Eastcott giving you concert tickets. I think for my part it looks rather suspicious. He is a young man I suppose. These Music teachers are always such high souled beings that I think they would exactly suit your fancy. (*L* 17–18, no. 7)

Her ability to jump from Abby to Sarah, William, Hatty, and Mr Eastcott demonstrates an ease and familiarity with discussing the personal details of multiple people. In fact, crushes ("partiality for him"), suitability for marriage ("he will make a devoted *husband*"), and unusual behavior ("it looks rather suspicious") were cause for plenty of gossip in Amherst. Dickinson herself had many crushes, never married, and exhibited very unusual behavior for her time. This may be why myths that were created about her have been perpetuated until the present day.

The Dickinson family name was well known and established long before Emily Dickinson's birth. Her paternal grandfather, Samuel, helped found Amherst College and funded various projects within town. When Emily Dickinson's father, Edward, was born, the family name was associated with wealth and social prominence. However, Samuel Dickinson funded schemes that were not financially viable, spent money his family could not afford to lose, and ultimately caused their financial ruin.

Edward Dickinson was forced to live on a shoestring budget at school, often sacrificing necessities that his classmates took for granted. His family's relentless financial struggles and the responsibility and shame for his father's mistakes forced Edward Dickinson into premature adulthood.

According to Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Emily Dickinson's niece, Edward was

> [a] rather haughty, austere man, shy and gentle, laconic and silent. He dressed in broadcloth at all times, and wore a black beaver hat glossy beyond compare with that of any young beau, and carried a handsome cane to and from his law office on the Main Street of his village. About his neck was wound a black satin stock pinned with a jet and diamond pin.[1]

Although he was "laconic and silent," Edward Dickinson held very strong views and opinions, particularly about the proper roles of men and women. In keeping with the conventions of his time, Edward Dickinson believed that it was a man's job to guard the women around him, a belief he later instilled in his only son Austin.[2] He also believed that women could best serve society as wives and mothers. Though Edward Dickinson supported education for women, like most men of his generation, he felt that the types of books women read should be closely monitored and controlled.

Finding a wife whose sensibility lived up to his expectations was a challenge for Edward Dickinson. However, he pursued marriage with the same fixed determination that he applied to financial and career matters. While attending a chemistry lecture one evening, he sat next to Emily Norcross, who lived in the neighboring town of Monson.[3] Edward Dickinson fixated on the gentle and pretty woman, courting her by letter for two and a half years.[4]

"My Dear [Emily], my heart is with you, and you are constantly in mind," Edward wrote, "I can only give you the parting hand, this morning, & leave the expression of a more ardent attachment till another time –."[5] He expressed his "ardent attachment" over the course of hundreds of letters to Emily Norcross, even though her responses were often discouraging. He also laid out his goals for a future married life:

> May blessings rest upon us, and make us happy – May we be virtuous, intelligent, industrious and by the exercise of every virtue, & the cultivation of every excellence, be esteemed & respected & beloved by all – We must determine to do our duty to each other, & to all our friends, and let others do as they may.[6]

Edward Dickinson's expectations of himself, his wife, and eventually his children were very high. It was not enough for Edward to be "virtuous, intelligent,

[and] industrious" – he also demanded the cultivation of "every" excellence and public acknowledgement "by all." The importance Edward Dickinson placed on "duty to each other" and his need to guide and control his family members show in many of his letters. In a letter written a few years after their marriage, Edward confessed, "I do feel almost guilty to be absent from my little family, during so long a time . . . I know the sacrifice you make in having me absent, is not small – with your natural timidity, & your strong reliance on your husband in time of trouble, I can imagine your suffering."[7]

By calling attention to his wife's "natural timidity" and "strong reliance" upon him, Edward Dickinson reinforces his dominant role in their relationship. During their courtship, Emily Norcross wrote considerably less than Edward. It is possible that she distrusted a passionate pursuit after such a scant acquaintance. After seeing Emily Norcross twice in person, Edward Dickinson proposed marriage.

Emily Norcross seemed hesitant, to say the least, about marrying this dashing and driven man. Some critics suggest that Emily Dickinson's mother projected a facade of compliance but remained independent in thought and action.[8] It is not surprising that her elder daughter would eventually display the same paradoxical mix of compliance and quiet rebellion. In fact, Emily Dickinson may have modeled her self-imposed seclusion on her mother's example; Mrs Dickinson was an invalid for much of her adult life.

Regardless of her reservations, Emily Norcross succumbed to Edward's persistence and pursuit and the couple married on 6 May 1828. Like most women of her time, the newly married Mrs Dickinson left her family, friends, and home to make a new life with her husband. Because Amherst lacked railroad access, she sent her dower by a pair of brindle oxen.

Almost immediately after marriage, the Dickinsons began building their family. Within five years they had three children: William Austin (16 April 1829), Emily Elisabeth (10 December 1830), and Lavinia Norcross (28 February 1833).

The house where the young family lived, and indeed, where Dickinson was born and spent most of her adult life, was known as The Homestead. Built by Dickinson's paternal grandfather, The Homestead was a two-story Federal-style brick home with a property line running straight down the middle. It was not unusual for a home at that time to be owned and occupied by more than one family and "as many as thirteen people" shared The Homestead.[9] Edward Dickinson, his wife Emily, and their children lived in one half of the house. The grandparents, Samuel and Lucretia Dickinson, and Edward's siblings lived in the other half. Both families shared a common kitchen and hearth. Because life in the two-household Homestead was crowded, it was difficult for anyone to have much privacy. The Dickinson children learned to adapt to their

close quarters, play without disturbing the other members of the house, and capitalize on any privacy they could find. These were all skills that Dickinson later employed as an adult in order to write poetry.

The Homestead's division into east and west halves not only meant that two families could live there, but also that portions of the house could be sold to different owners. When Edward Dickinson's law practice began to falter, he sold his stake in the house to his cousin, who then sold the entire building.[10] In 1840 the Dickinsons moved to West Street (known today as Pleasant Street), where Emily Dickinson lived from age nine to age twenty-five.[11]

A portrait of the poet as a young girl

When she was nine years old, Dickinson entered Amherst Academy, a school that had recently begun accepting female students. Amherst Academy was founded to provide religious instruction. A typical school day began with prayer, continued with instruction in various academic disciplines, and then concluded with more prayer. While studying at Amherst Academy, Dickinson read a number of religious texts, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, and William Cowper's *The Task*.[12] While emphasizing religious instruction, Amherst Academy also offered a rigorous secular education. Dickinson took courses such as English, Latin, geology, algebra, geometry, botany, and history.[13]

Perhaps even more important than facilitating her education, Amherst Academy gave Emily Dickinson opportunities for building friendships. Her first schoolgirl devotions were precursors to the intense literary friendships she would maintain as an adult. In a newsy letter about school, Dickinson wrote, "We really have some most charming young women in school this term. I sha'n't call them anything but women, for women they are in every sense of the word" (*L* 14, no. 6). These statements not only reveal Dickinson's pride in her peers but also a proto-feminist insistence on calling them "women." Among her favorite young women were Abiah Root, Helen Fiske, and Helen Hunt (eventually Helen Hunt Jackson). Her devotion to these friends was steadfast. "I keep your lock of hair as precious as gold," she wrote to Abiah, "I often look at it when I go to my little lot of treasures, and wish the owner of that glossy lock were here" (*L* 9, no. 5).

In addition to her cherished friends, Dickinson also adored her instructors. "You know I am always in love with my teachers," she wrote to Abiah (*L* 45, no. 15). When one of her most beloved teachers married and left teaching, Dickinson tried to sound happy for her teacher, but her 1847 letter reveals conflicting feelings:

> Yet, much as we love her, it seems lonely & strange without "Our dear Miss Adams." I suppose you know she has left Amherst, not again to return as a teacher. It is indeed true, that she is to be married . . . She seemed to be very happy in anticipation of her future prospects, & I hope she will realize all her fond hopes. I cannot bear to think that she will never more wield the sceptre, & sit upon the throne in our venerable schoolhouse, & yet I am glad she is going to have a home of her own & a kind companion to take life's journey with her. (*L* 45–6, no. 15)

Although Dickinson "cannot bear" to think of her regal teacher leaving, she says what duty demands – she congratulates Miss Adams on achieving a "home of her own" and "a kind companion." However, the language Dickinson uses to discuss Miss Adams shows that a schoolroom can be a woman's kingdom, a place where she can reign, "wield the sceptre," and "sit upon the throne." This is a position of power that Miss Adams will lose when she marries and becomes part of her husband's household. In addition to her sadness over the "dethroning" of a teacher, Dickinson felt "lonely & strange" about being left behind. It was a feeling that would happen again and again throughout her life. Her friendship with Abiah Root, which spanned a decade of long, detail-rich letters, ended in 1854 after Abiah's marriage. Because no known letters between the women exist after that date, it appears that Abiah left her girlhood friend behind when she married, or that Dickinson felt she could not compete with a husband for her friend's affection. As her friends married and moved away, Dickinson felt more abandoned and alone.

School was fun for the young, curious Emily Dickinson. She enjoyed many subjects and acquired information (scientific language, mathematical diction) that would later inform her poetry. She studied botany, and her letters and poems demonstrate an awareness of the scientific names and classifications of many plants and flowers, although she often preferred their common names. Her knowledge of plant names may have come from one of her most treasured school projects – a herbarium, or plant specimen collection. This was a collection of pressed and labeled specimens kept in an 11 by 13 inch leather book. Dickinson carefully pressed and labeled each stem, flower, and leaf, noting the class and order. She collected specimens from forests, fields, and even her own garden. Always a magnanimous and generous friend, she also collected plants, leaves, and wildflowers for her friends' collections.

The herbarium is especially interesting for Dickinson scholars, who see in it the beginning of Dickinson's love of nature, scientific precision, and meticulous observation. The collection of over 400 specimens may also be a precursor to the hand-bound poetry collections, known as fascicles, that Dickinson would assemble as an adult. In fact, as she matured, the boundaries between plants

and pages blurred more and more: she wrote poems about flowers, wrapped flowers in poems, and carefully observed and nurtured words and plants alike. One of her favorite flowers was the white saprophytic Indian pipe, an exquisitely delicate and difficult flower to cultivate. There was no way for Dickinson to know that, on 12 November 1890, the very same flowers would grace the title page of the first edition of her published poems.[14]

The garden was a refuge for Emily Dickinson. She doted on her plants, covering them to protect against frost, carefully watering and clipping them, and writing detailed instructions for their care when she was away from home. The garden was an escape from the demands of family, household, and society. It was also a place where Dickinson could observe nature. Many of the living creatures and plants that inhabited her garden – including snakes, bumblebees, and bobolinks – appeared in her poetry. The garden was a place where Dickinson felt she belonged. "I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam," she joked in a letter to Abiah Root (*L* 24, no. 9). The garden was also a great source of pride for Dickinson. When her brother Austin was in Boston, Dickinson bragged that the splendors of the city could not compare with the splendor of her own garden: "never mind faded forests, Austin, never mind silent fields – *here* is a little forest whose leaf is ever green, here is a *brighter* garden, where not a frost has been, in its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum, prithee, my Brother, into *my* garden come!" (*L* 149, no. 58).

Although as an adult Emily Dickinson restricted her life to her home in Amherst, as a young woman she traveled several times to large cities in the area. In 1846, when she was only fifteen years old, Dickinson traveled alone to Boston. She sent a letter to Abiah Root describing her Boston adventures:

> Father & Mother thought a journey would be of service to me & accordingly, I left for Boston week before last. I had a delightful ride in the cars & am now quietly settled down, if there can be such a state in the city. I am visiting my aunt's family & am happy . . . I have been to Mount Auburn, to the Chinese Museum, to Bunker hill. I have attended 2 concerts, & 1 Horticultural exhibition. I have been upon the top of the State house & almost everywhere that you can imagine. Have you ever been to Mount Auburn? If not you can form but slight conception – of the "City of the dead." (*L* 36, no. 13)

Modern readers tend to think that Dickinson was always a shy, self-sequestered recluse, but in fact she traveled with her father, lived with relatives for extended periods of time, and had many friends. Her description of the city is particularly interesting, given her ongoing interest in death and the afterlife. Boston was a "City of the dead" to Dickinson in multiple senses: it was a site of American

history and Dickinson arrived the week of a heat wave in the city that contributed to the deaths of over 100 people (*L* 38, no. 13).

After completing her program at Amherst Academy, Dickinson entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley in 1847. Founded by Mary Lyon, the Seminary sought to instill religious values and prepare young women to become suitable wives and mothers.[15] The sixteen-year-old Dickinson felt homesick in this strictly controlled environment.[16] "It has been nearly six weeks since I left home & that is a longer time, than I was ever away from home before now. I was very homesick for a few days & it seemed to me I could not live here," she wrote on 6 November 1847 (*L* 53, no. 18). In many ways, Dickinson's Mount Holyoke letters could just as easily be e-mails sent home by a typical college freshman today. She complains about dorm food, savors care packages from home, keeps secrets from her parents, and tries to sound independent even though she is homesick. After a visit from her brother Austin, Dickinson wrote,

> I watched you until you were out of sight Saturday evening & then went to my room & looked over my treasures & surely no miser ever counted his heaps of gold, with more satisfaction than I gazed upon the presents from home.
>
> The cake, gingerbread, pie, & peaches are all devoured, but the – apples – chestnuts & grapes still remain & will I hope for some time.
>
> (*L* 47–8, no. 16)

The artificial cloister of Dickinson's education must have been frustrating. She longed to know details about the world outside Mount Holyoke and wrote letters to Austin that simultaneously begged for news and poked fun at her own isolation:

> Wont you please to tell me when you answer my letter who the candidate for President is? I have been trying to find out ever since I came here & have not yet succeeded. I dont know anything more about affairs in the world, than if I was in a trance . . . Has the Mexican war terminated yet & how? Are we beat? Do you know of any nation about to besiege South Hadley? If so, do inform me of it, for I would be glad of a chance to escape, if we are to be stormed. I suppose Miss Lyon. would furnish us all with daggers & order us to fight for our lives, in case such perils should befall us. (*L* 49, no. 16)

Like many of her letters, this one demonstrates Dickinson's sharp wit and ability to discuss serious issues (longing for knowledge about politics and war) alongside playful banter (a hypothetical nation storming her inconsequential school town).

Dickinson's roommate at Mount Holyoke was her cousin, Emily Lavinia Norcross.[17] Like many of Dickinson's friends and relatives, Emily Lavinia Norcross suffered from "consumption," or tuberculosis.[18] The disease was not well understood at the time, and people did not know that it was transmittable by air. Because of Dickinson's proximity to her cousin and her own faltering health, some critics have surmised that Dickinson was also infected with TB. In May of her first year at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson became sick and developed a cough. Her 16 May 1848 letter describes her effort to conceal her illness from her parents as well as how the secret was disclosed:

> I had not been very well all winter, but had not written home about it, lest the folks should take me home. During the week following examinations, a friend from Amherst came over and spent a week with me, and when that friend returned home, father and mother were duly notified of the state of my health. Have you so treacherous a friend?
>
> Now knowing that I was to be reported at home, you can imagine my amazement and consternation when Saturday of the same week Austin arrived in full sail, with orders from head-quarters to bring me home at all events. At first I had recourse to words, and a desperate battle with those weapons was waged for a few moments, between my *Sophomore* brother and myself. Finding words of no avail, I next resorted to tears . . . As you can imagine, Austin was victorious, and poor, defeated I was led off in triumph. (*L* 65, no. 23)

In this letter, Dickinson's frustration at the revelation of her illness by a well-intentioned but "treacherous" friend and subsequent kidnapping by her brother is evident. The letter also exhibits rarely voiced but persistent bitterness toward her more powerful, privileged, and "victorious" brother. She patronizes Austin by mocking his seniority. Even though he has completed more years in college than she has, he is still only a second-year student. She may also be playing with the etymology of sophomore, which is a combination of the Greek words for "wise" as well as "foolish."

While Dickinson was studying at Mount Holyoke, Austin was preparing for a career in law. All three Dickinson children wrote poetry and, like his sisters, Austin was "a hero-worshipper, a partisan, and a lover of all the rare and noble books."[19] However, while Austin was encouraged to read books, his sisters' reading was carefully monitored: "[Father] buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the Mind," Dickinson wrote (*L* 404, no. 261).

However, Austin would hide the forbidden books so Dickinson could read them. For example, he tucked a copy of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's

Kavanagh under a piano cover.[20] Although she gleefully conspired with her brother, Dickinson's early letters reveal that she also felt threatened by Austin's encroachment upon her poetic territory. In a letter to her brother, she sarcastically announced, "And Austin is a Poet, Austin writes a psalm. Out of the way, Pegasus, Olympus enough 'to him,' and just say to those 'nine muses' that we have done with them!" (*L* 235, no. 110). As a middle child in a tight-knit family, writing was one of the few ways Dickinson was able to distinguish herself from her older "Brother Pegasus" and younger sister Vinnie.

Early ambitions, difficult changes

Although Dickinson established herself as "the writer" in the family, her future remained uncertain. It was acceptable for a woman in the early nineteenth century to work as a teacher, nurse, or governess, but none of these occupations appealed to Dickinson.[21] Even if she had had the audacity to defy her father and become a "literary woman," there were few opportunities for a woman interested in writing and literature whose poetic style was as elliptical and complex as hers.

Dickinson's literary guides were the authors she read at night in her room. She hung pictures of Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot in her bedroom.[22] In 1849, a friend lent Dickinson a copy of *Jane Eyre*, a controversial new book published by a mysterious author named Currer Bell. The author's name was a pseudonym and many book reviewers and critics hypothesized about the author's true name and gender. Critics complained that *Jane Eyre*'s heroine was too self-reliant, independent, and common to be a moral model for women. Dickinson was aware of this controversy, but she loved the novel. When she returned the borrowed book, she enclosed a bouquet of leaves and the following note:

> Mr. Bowdoin.
>
> If all these leaves were altars, and on every one a prayer that Currer Bell might be saved – and you were God – would you answer it?
>
> (*L* 77, no. 28)

In her typical style, Dickinson does not simply thank her friend for lending the book, but instead sends a witty and allusive epigram about the book itself. The note could mean that Dickinson wants Currer Bell to be "saved" and live a long life in order to write more books as pleasing as *Jane Eyre*. The letter could also be Dickinson's nod toward the controversial nature of the book and her own belief that Bell had not offended God and deserved to be "saved." She goes so