

# I NEVER CAME TO YOU IN WHITE

*A Novel About Emily Dickinson*



JUDITH FARR

*"Peculiar, incandescent, astonishing"*

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

MARINER BOOKS

*I Never Came  
to You in White*

A N O V E L

JUDITH FARR



*A Peter Davison Book*

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON NEW YORK

1996

Copyright © 1996 by Judith Farr  
All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from  
this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company,  
215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

For information about this and other Houghton Mifflin  
trade and reference books and multimedia products, visit  
The Bookstore at Houghton Mifflin on the World Wide Web  
at <http://www.hmco.com/trade/>.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Farr, Judith.

*I never came to you in white : a novel* / Judith Farr

p. cm.

"A Peter Davison book."

ISBN 0-395-78840-4

1. Dickinson, Emily, 1830–1886 — Correspondence — Fiction.
2. Women poets, American — 19th century — Fiction. I. Title.

PS3556.A73312 1996

813'.54 — dc20 96-11654 CIP

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Melodie Werteleit

Selections from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*: Reprinted by  
permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College  
from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed.,  
Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,  
Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows  
of Harvard College.

*For George, with love*

“What would you do with me  
if I came ‘in white’?”

•

— *Emily Dickinson,*  
*Letter to “Master,” about 1861*

*I Never Came  
to You in White*

*1 • Emily Dickinson Writes to  
a Mysterious Person, 10 September 1847*

*I* do not, cannot, call you anything yet; I am not sure yet what you are to me. But you are rooted in my deepest heart. You have been for a year.

I must go to Miss Lyon's tomorrow. Father insists. But I know that I do not leave you in this room when I go. I know that you will follow me.

I will speak to you always in my *real* voice: not in the polished syllables I must use for others — the bright thin talk of the tea table, the sewing circle and the classroom. Nor will I speak to you in that rhetorical voice I use to keep strangers away. To you, I will speak in the hard plain tongue of my Soul.

You will not mind if I am passionate!

Do not fail to enter the buggy with me tomorrow.  
Do not fail!

II • Margaret Mann Writes to  
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 10 September 1891

*M*y dear Mr. Higginson:

Are you too occupied to hear my voice?

I am a stranger to you and so you may not understand why I take the liberty of addressing you. But an old woman like myself, sixty-seven momentarily, cannot linger too much longer in this world, and I *must* ease my conscience with respect to someone who concerns you. Someone who has *deeply* concerned you, judging by the Preface you have written to her poems.

I speak of Emily Dickinson.

I was her teacher almost fifty years ago. Things happened between us, and I did things — things I cannot forget.

I am told that you are not only a journalist, but an ordained minister. (By the way, I have long admired your pieces in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Very affecting, I always find them, especially that essay called “The Procession of the Flowers.” It’s the rare man who appreciates flowers!) My problem is of a spiritual nature. I know that you are a good person, I can tell that from your writing style — so self-effacing and wholesome. I feel that you will want to help me.

But if you are to help me, I must tell you a long story. I entreat you, will you hear it? If so, will you write me to that effect?

Yours sincerely,  
*Margaret Mann*



III • *Emily Norcross Writes to Her Step-Grandmother,*  
*Mrs. Joel Norcross, 10 September 1847*

Dear Mamma,

You will be pleased no doubt to learn that I had an uneventful journey from our own blessed home to the sacred portals of Miss Lyon's, where Religion still flourishes and Learning follows suit. On my arrival, several of the young ladies I took classes with last year were awaiting me in the Recreation Parlors, and, Mamma, we had many high jinks in the very first golden moments alone! Sarah Albright has put up her hair, although she is only sixteen! Now, Mamma, you would never have let me do so. You recall how you did forbid it, saying it was never right to "hasten Nature" and seem more grown-up than your years. But *her* Mamma obviously disagrees with you! Miss Jenny Ridley from Charleston, S.C., says she was the "reigning belle" of that city all summer long, but, as Livia Coleman whispered to me under her breath while Miss Jenny boasted, "Charleston is a no-account village full of puffed-up simpletons." If one were voted the Belle of a serious city like Boston or even a sober town like Amherst, now *that* would be a compliment! New Englanders don't tell lies!

Speaking of Amherst, Cousin Emily Dickinson has arrived with many boxes and books. She is the only girl on our corridor who has come away to school with her own books. (Isn't it enough that we are burdened with Miss Lyon's choices?) Some of the other young

ladies watched her in dumb amazement as she unwrapped her Testament, a lexicon, an atlas, and several parcels that were full of what I am afraid to report are “novels” — she confessed it — written by foreigners. One is called *The Old Curiosity Shop* by that Englishman named “Dickins”; she has been reading it every chance she gets. Maybe she likes it because the Englishman’s name sounds like hers.

You asked me to say right away if I like Emily, Mamma. Of course I *want* very much to like her and maybe I shall. It has been so many years since we met. I wish it had not been so many or that you had invited her to visit us before deciding that I must be her sponsor here and share her room. I know I should not complain, Mamma, but I would have preferred a girl my own age for a companion, not a younger one like Emily — a girl who is new to the Seminary besides! I do recall what a dear lonely little thing Emily seemed when we were small and she came to Monson to stay while my Aunt Emily was sick. I can still picture her sitting sorrowfully on the stairs outside the kitchen, all alone and staring at her little boots until Papa went out to her and picked her up and hugged her hard. She was worried that Aunt Emily was going to die, remember? But after we cheered her up, she turned merry and liked to laugh and tell stories. That was the year she and I made a lovely tree house for our dollies.

But Emily seems different now. She’s very courteous, Mamma, and she receives my advice respectfully as befits a girl who is a whole year younger than myself. Yet somehow I fear she won’t settle down and be happy

and normal like the rest of us. There's something *strange* about her.

Do you know what she told me this morning? She said she hasn't joined the church yet, despite all the eloquence of the Revival, because she "can't give up the world"! Now, Mamma, don't that beat all? What "world" would that girl know about?

Your loving grand-daughter,  
*Emily Norcross*

*M*y dear Miss Margaret Mann,

It was with great joy that I read the name "Emily Dickinson" in your letter of some weeks ago. I beg your forgiveness for not having replied to it sooner. My beloved wife has been ill and when at first her ailment seemed serious, anxiety so overwhelmed me that I was quite unable to write so much as my signature. Mercifully, she is now recovered. But then the book I had set aside (its title may amuse you: *Common Sense About Women*) claimed my attention. It is to be published in a few weeks and I had been given proofs to read. My silence, however, is no measure of my interest in you or, more precisely, in the contents of your letter!

You cannot know this, dear Miss Mann, but your letter contained a phrase, "Are you too occupied," that nearly stopped my heart. When I read it, thirty years fell away and I was returned to that morning of April sixteenth, 1862, when I stood in the post office in Worcester, Massachusetts, and took delivery of a most remarkable letter. The letter contained — how well I remember! I have it still, still re-read it, and am struck by it again — the most abrupt of salutations. No "Dear ———," no "My dear ———." Just "Mr. Higginson," like a thunder-clap. And then this arresting sentence: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"

In those days, I had just begun to write my essays for the *Atlantic*, one of which you kindly commended. Because so many would-be poets wrote to me asking for advice, and because the *Atlantic* was tired of receiving manuscripts from tyros, the editors had urged me to offer the public some counsel about writing. That April I published my "Letter to a Young Contributor." After Miss Emily Dickinson — once, oh marvelous even to contemplate, your pupil! — read it, she sent me that first of many treasured letters. She also enclosed four poems, so I could judge whether her poetry "breathed." I see myself still, a busy, lively, well-meaning youth with three newspapers under his arm, standing stock-still in the post office amid a throng of people mailing packages to the soldiers, trying to read one of those poems. The poem was hard for me to read. All her poems were — stunning, elusive, brilliant. But unorthodox!

The poem began "We play at paste." Yet I knew it was not about its apparent subject, how pearls are made. I recognized that the writer was telling me that *she* knew how to make pearls, that her poem was a pearl. What the Bible calls "a pearl of great price," perhaps. I can only imagine what she may have been like as a student, but I can report that as a poet Miss Dickinson was very daring.

Oh yes, my dear Miss Mann, I should be most happy to hear anything you may say about Emily Dickinson. Nothing you could write would be too long. No one could possibly imagine how much I miss my dear friend, now that she has — in the words of her favorite

Emily Brontë — “put on Immortality.” That is, if she could ever be said to have put it off! I always thought Miss Dickinson came so clearly from Heaven that some of its light shone forth from her eyes.

Very cordially yours,  
*T. W. Higginson*

V • Margaret Mann Writes to  
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 11 October 1891

Dear Mr. Higginson,

I thank you heartily for replying to my letter. I have stifled myself a long while because it *hurts* me to remember what I must tell you. I need help, I need grace, I need light! When a Quaker woman like me knows she has lost her inner light, it is impossible for her not to seek guidance, even from a Unitarian like yourself.

I think I should commence by giving you my very first impression of Emily Dickinson. If you think *your* first encounter with her poetry was challenging, you will be amazed to hear of my initial contact with her! I met her on the morning I began my life as a teacher of rhetoric. My first task was to read the roll, and there were so many names to call out that they were all a blur to me. I remembered Emily's later, only because of her startling behavior. Miss Lyon was very strict about form. And so every day we teachers had to get up on a small dais in Seminary Hall and first see to it that the young ladies were well combed and well washed, standing in perfect rows, and then call out their names. It seemed easy, but, like everything else in life, it wasn't.

I prayed that morning because I was so anxious. I prayed, "O God of Our Fathers, enable your humble servant Margaret Mann to rise above her pettiness and frailty to serve you in the capacity of writing mistress. Help me to draw the hearts in my care to your mercy

and love." This was the prayer that my father, a Quaker minister, had written out for me before I left Springfield to serve under Miss Lyon. And I know he meant it to calm and steady me, but it did not.

I entered the Hall shivering, not just from the September chill. I seemed to myself too young for school-mistressing and, as the sun streamed through the tall windows so radiantly, I wished I were far away and alone by myself in my mother's orchard. There were, I thought, too many names, and the rows of girls in their brown or blue or claret merino gowns and their white or yellow pinafores, their braids, their cameos at the throat, bored me already. As I knew very well, it is a great sin to be bored. But I plucked up my courage, looked at my list, and spoke the names distinctly with what Father would have called "spirit."

The names were as old-fashioned as stir-about pudding — not like the smart Frenchified ones of today. I can still see the list:

Laetitia Partington Snowe  
Frances Maria Upson  
Anna Robinson  
Fanny Arms  
Georgiana McElwain  
Sarah Cairns  
Julia Dame Bodfish  
Katharina Cobleigh  
Nettie Coolidge  
Ella Swenarton  
Lena Aldritch  
Emily Norcross



Malvina Stanton  
Sarah Wright  
and Emily Dickinson.

I do not think, even now, that I should be blamed for not recognizing, on that first day of school, whom and what I had before me. "Emily Dickinson" is a commonplace name in western Massachusetts. There are hundreds of Dickinsons. Father claims they think of themselves as a distinguished group, descended from some medieval French knight called De Kenson. But the Dickinson we knew in Springfield was only a blacksmith. "Emily" is the most ordinary of names besides. I don't know how many Emilys I myself went to school with. And this Emily was thin and plain with not a single pretty feature or grace. (Well, she had almost translucently fair skin, it's true, and when she smiled, her lip curled in a merry fashion.) The first time I set eyes on her, she looked like the ghost of a ghost in her gray dress. I found myself wondering how a ghost would reply as I went down the call-out list, but the ghost never answered me. When I said her name, she just kept staring off into the distance with that peculiar thinking look on her face. I was irritated. It was the first of many times she made me irritated. So I sputtered, "Miss, do you have another name in mind, or are you going to learn to answer to your own?" And the baggage looked straight at me then, bright as a sixpence, and said, right out in front of all the others, "I do have a private name for myself, Ma'am, though I am sorry to have missed your saying mine. I was daydreaming. You see, I always think of myself as Eve."