



Edited by two of her friends MABEL LOOMIS TODD and T. W. HIGGINSON

Introduction by CARY WILKINS

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INTRODUCTION

"Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands."

Tennessee Williams used these words of E.E. Cummings as an epigraph to his play *The Glass Menagerie*. They describe the character of Laura Wingfield, a shy, reclusive girl who lives in her own private world. They are also a perfect description of Emily Dickinson, one of the most important poets in American literature.

Even though we cannot see a drop of rain filtering through the soil, we know that it may eventually supply nourishment to a seed, which will take root and blossom. But only a very few people knew about the seeds of ideas that were nourished by the unseen hands of Emily Dickinson. The hundreds of poems that blossomed from her pen were discovered—by her astonished sister—not until after her death in 1886.

Born on December 10, 1830, she spent most of her life in Amherst, Massachusetts. A school friend recalled that, although Emily was shy and retiring, there was no indication of her future reclusive life. She began writing poems in the 1850s, and her creative activity reached a peak in 1862. After that year, she withdrew more and more into herself and eventually did not even go out of the house.

It is therefore surprising to read her "letter to the world"—a treasury of poems that expands one's comprehension of life, love, nature, and immortality. Through her keen observation of people and things around her and through her deeply introspective nature, she was able to write about universal themes and feelings.

She dealt with these themes in several different ways. Casual readers of Emily Dickinson are probably familiar with only one or two sides of her personality. "If I can stop one heart from breaking" is one poem that is often associated with her. Or one may know her cute and impish side: "I'm nobody! Who are you?" She could also write, however, a poem as striking and penetrating as Ingmar

Bergman's best films: "There's a certain slant of light,/On winter afternoons." In her poem "The bustle in a house," she uses the most unusual, yet the most appropriate, images to show how death affects one: "The sweeping up the heart/And putting love away..." The images of violence and death in the poem "Two swimmers wrestled on the spar" are not what some people would expect from the "belle of Amherst."

She dared to break away from conventional poetic techniques by experimenting with unusual rhythms and near-rhymes. Her ability to pare a phrase to its essence is what makes her best poems so startlingly alive. Her originality makes them fresh, even after all these years.

"If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then." These words appear in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the first editors of her poems, and explain why she did not want her poems published. "How dreary to be somebody! How public, like a frog"

In addition to Mr. Higginson, she corresponded with a few close friends, "Hills . . . and the sundown, and a dog large as myself . . ."—these were the only companions she desired.

Mr. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd took on the job of editing her poems after her death. The first volume appeared in 1890 and is reprinted here in its entirety. Six poems from the second volume are also included. Gradually, she became recognized as an important voice in American literature, and all her poems and letters were eventually published.

Emily Dickinson dedicated herself to telling "The simple news that Nature told." One can describe her poetic gift with the words of E. E. Cummings, just as she described the mysteries of Nature with these words: "Her message is committed/To hands I cannot see"

CARY WILKINS

May 1978

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PREFACE.

THE verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called "the Poetry of the Portfolio,"—something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer's own mind. Such verse must inevitably forfeit whatever advantage lies in the discipline of public criticism and the enforced conformity to accepted ways. On the other hand, it may often gain something through the habit of freedom and the unconventional utterance of daring thoughts. In the case of the present author, there was absolutely no choice in the matter; she must write thus, or not at all. A recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep, and many more years

during which her walks were strictly limited to her father's grounds, she habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends; and it was with great difficulty that she was persuaded to print, during her lifetime, three or four poems. Yet she wrote verses in great abundance; and though curiously indifferent to all conventional rules, had yet a rigorous literary standard of her own, and often altered a word many times to suit an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness.

Miss Dickinson was born in Amherst, Mass., Dec. 10, 1830, and died there May 15, 1886. Her father, Hon. Edward Dickinson, was the leading lawyer of Amherst, and was treasurer of the well-known college there situated. It was his custom once a year to hold a large reception at his house, attended by all the families connected with the institution and by the leading people of the town. On these occasions his daughter Emily emerged from her wonted retirement and did her part as gracious hostess; nor would any one have known from her manner, I have been told, that this was not a daily occurrence. The annual

occasion once past, she withdrew again into her seclusion, and except for a very few friends was as invisible to the world as if she had dwelt in a nunnery. For myself, although I had corresponded with her for many years, I saw her but twice face to face, and brought away the impression of something as unique and remote as Undine or Mignon or Thekla.

This selection from her poems is published to meet the desire of her personal friends, and especially of her surviving sister. It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found, — flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame. They are here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes; although it is fair to say that the titles have been assigned, almost invariably, by the editors. In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and

dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed. In other cases, as in the few poems of shipwreck or of mental conflict, we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. Ruskin wrote in his earlier and better days, "No weight nor mass nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought."

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON.