

Visiting Emily

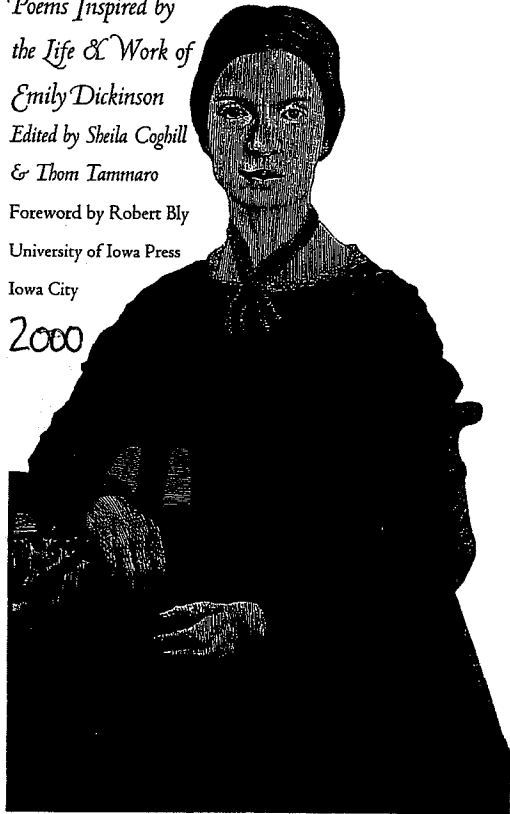
Poems Inspired by
the Life & Work of
Emily Dickinson

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Foreword by Robert Bly
University of Iowa Press

Iowa City

2000



Emily Dickinson in Boston, 1864–65

RICHARD FOERSTER

*... the calls at the Doctor's are painful, and dear Vinnie,
I have not looked at the Spring.*

— E. D. from Cambridge, May 1864

That daguerreotype, with its strabismic gaze,
skews my understanding of her miracle years,
when all heaven seemed to spin on her lathe
and the work fell solid, by the hundreds.

All her life she'd slowly been shutting doors,
until striding home one day through a spume
of widow's lace (or loosestrife or asters)
she'd had enough, and turned the lock, like so,

and doffed her wide-brimmed hat without a flourish.
But what did it mean to select the white austerities,
to know the world through an atlas circumscribed
and limned on a bedroom's frost-etched panes,

to spar each day with "that little god with epaulettes"
and win? The niceties of legend blanch against the plate:
Her right eye pins us to the paradox of serenity
(how long did she have to hold that pose?); the left eye

strays to confront some hidden radiance — a terror,
she later called it — lurking on vision's periphery.
Symptoms: Foci out of sync, solids ghosted,
the gentlest lights clinging like burrs, ciliary shudders,

all the small betrayals plus that final voltage:
whole foundries of print smeared across the page. Surely
more than panic spurred her into poetry's rolling fires
for those three years. . . . But strolling here, toward dusk,

through the Public Garden – past the swan boats
nuzzling their piers, among the quiet, bivouacked flocks
hoarding the last fugitive rays – I want to imagine her,
here, sure-footed, beyond the squinched regime

of her doctor's care, beyond the clotted vacancies
of the Charles, come to this shadowed calm, this willed
clarity among the geraniums' percussive reds, and yet
it's dislocated fear I sense – a blur – and hurry on.