

Introduction

They say every family has its eccentric. In my family it was Uncle William Norcross. He was a doctor, an expert on infectious disease who made a quiet living as a consultant to charitable organizations. Later in life after the death of his wife, and a subsequent failed romance, he moved to Amherst, Massachusetts—the home of his lifelong obsession, the poet Emily Dickinson.

For the last twenty-two years of his life, William rented a tiny apartment in the tower of a Victorian house not far from the Dickinson Homestead.

There he disappeared from public view for weeks at a time. He dropped hints that he was working on a manuscript of earth-shaking importance, but I never quite believed him. He was a medical man, not a writer, I thought.

Over the years, based on his extensive research, he devised some novel theories about Emily Dickinson's withdrawal from the world and a long distance love affair with a married man, all of which—according to William—prompted some of her most extraordinary poetry. He must have known that his ideas would astound some and dismay others.

There were also stories during those years that a wraith-like figure, clad all in white, sometimes drifted about Amherst in the early hours before dawn, and some connected William with its appearance, though that was never substantiated. Once, indeed, the figure was said to enter the little bakery close to the Dickinson homestead, and a message chalked itself on the daily menu board: *Graham bread today, ½ gill of lard*. Rumors and hearsay, probably.

Upon my uncle's death the following manuscript was discovered among his papers. At first I couldn't take his hypothesis seriously, but as I read on, I came to know and understand an Emily Dickinson who was altogether new and endearing. I saw how her upbringing contributed to her reclusiveness, how her sly sense of humor developed in the give and take of family interactions, and how her ecstasy and despair were opposite sides of the same coin. Her beautiful but enigmatic poems seemed, suddenly, more human and approachable; and for the first time I felt I understood the love and the pain that were so much a part of her poetry.

William's manuscript is now in your hands. I hope you will give his life's work the care and attention that I believe it deserves.

Sincerely,

James Sulzer,
Nephew and Executor