

## Called Back

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One summer not so long ago, a group of poets, story-tellers, and other fanciful dreamers like me gathered in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts to live and work together for seven days and seven nights. Every day we tried to write something fresh and entertaining, and every night, fueled by goodly amounts of wine, we had a fine old time reading our poems and telling our stories to one another. On our final night together, after the last story was told and the last poem was read, some of us walked into the center of Amherst to have one last glass of wine, one last cup of coffee together. No one wanted to say goodbye. We wanted to remember each other forever—such being the nature of gatherings like this. Among the characters in our group was a flamboyant, young man named Devon and a tall, young woman who looked like Julia Roberts. I mention Devon's flamboyance because *he* seemed so very proud of it, and Julia, not because she was beautiful—which she was— but because she possessed an aura of poise and gentleness beyond her years. What attracted Julia to Devon I cannot say, but during our week together they had grown inseparable.

One cannot be long in Amherst without learning something about Emily Dickinson and the prominent Dickenson family that lived in the town more than 130 years ago. Earlier in the week I had taken the ten-dollar tour of Emily's home, her grave site, and her brother's house next door, so I was pretty well up on my Emilybilia. Our tour guide reminded us that by middle age, Emily had become reclusive and given to odd behavior. When visitors called on the Dickinson sisters, Emily listened to their conversations from another room, or stood behind a heavy curtain. Emily loved to bake, and from the kitchen window she lowered slices of freshly baked bread to her young nephew, Gil, but only rarely was Gil allowed in the house. She spent hours alone in her bedroom, but wrote, "Alone I cannot be, for hosts do visit me." Today Emily's home is a museum. The tour guides have their stories down pat. Hosts of visitors point and shoot their digital cameras—but Emily left the building long ago. Can we even be sure that the town of Amherst is real? I suppose Amherst is real enough if one lives there, but to visitors, Amherst seems real at first but becomes surreal in one's memory. It's a town where the 1880s and the 1950s and the 2000s exist in parallel, where people and things we thought disappeared long ago are still with us.

It was getting along toward midnight and our group was in a crowded coffee bar that should have served better coffee than it did. Devon floated through the crowd and loudly announced he and Julia wanted to visit Emily Dickenson's grave. Did anyone know where it was? Did anyone want to come? I said I did, and if we could get an ice cream cone on the way, I would take them right to it.

Now, here's the deal on Emily Dickinson. When she was alive, she wasn't even close to being the most famous person in town. She stayed indoors, or pattered quietly in her garden, and almost no one could say they knew her. There is only one photograph of her, a daguerreotype of a teenage girl with her hair parted in the middle, Civil War style; it's the photo

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that's printed in every modern volume of Emily's poems. The big man in Amherst was Emily's brother Austin, a lawyer, the treasurer, and sometimes the de facto president of Amherst College. Such was Austin's power and influence in the town that the people called him "Squire Dickenson."

Austin, his wife Susan, and their three children lived next door to Emily on a continuous plot of wooded land. Today, the interior of Austin's and Susan's house is dark, gloomy, and in a serious state of disrepair—but *virtually unchanged since it was last decorated by Susan Dickinson in 1890*. When the house became part of the Emily Dickinson Museum in 2004, curators found little Gil Dickinson's play clothes still folded in his bedroom dresser, and bits of leaves and small stones tucked away in the pockets.

From the 1880s and until his death in 1896, Squire Dickenson conducted a long and infamous love affair with the local astronomy professor's wife, Mabel Loomis Todd, the most intimate moments of which were conducted on Emily's library sofa. Considering how many layers of clothing Mabel and the Squire wore, one wonders how they managed it, but they did, and right under Emily's nose too, or more accurately, right under Emily's bedroom. Two years after Emily died, her sister hired Mabel to edit and type hundreds of Emily's poems on a World #1, an early typewriter operated by turning a lettered dial with one hand and punching down on a single key with the other. Although she never succeeded in meeting Emily face to face, Austin's lover, Mabel Loomis Todd, made Emily immortal.

Sensing adventure at hand, Devon, Julia and I walked from the coffee bar across Pleasant Avenue and passed a shop window filled with old typewriters. It seems this shop is famous, too, famous for its window display of rebuilt Underwoods, Royals and Remingtons. When I saw them on display, I was reminded how mechanically perfect and beautiful these machines were at the end of their era. Earlier in the week, one workshop instructor said, "I still do my first drafts on a manual typewriter. That's why I'm so happy to be back in Amherst where I can buy a typewriter ribbons from a real person." Looking in the shop window, I thought I might want to buy a typewriter ribbon from a real person, too. Maybe even a typewriter.

So, on a warm, summer night, with strawberry ice cream dripping down our chins, Devon, Julia and I walked down the street from the typewriter shop, across a parking lot behind a Mobile station and through a rusty gate into the town's old cemetery. One would think a town so proud of Emily Dickenson would do more to keep up the cemetery where she's buried, but they don't. The three of us walked along a cinder path among long shadows, tall headstones and even taller weeds until we came upon the rusty, iron fence that protects the graves of the Emily and her sister.

I say "we," but Devon and Julia lagged behind me, and from Devon's continuous chatter and Julia's silence I sensed that neither of them felt as adventurous as they had been a few minutes ago. In the darkness and shadows of the graveyard, I leaned against the iron fence and waited. Julia walked up. She was quiet and contemplative, perhaps understanding that she, a poet herself, was standing on hallowed ground. Then Devon arrived, more agitated than ever. He reached through the iron fence, traced his fingers over the letters of Emily's headstone and said, "Oh, my God, oh, my God," several times. He tried to take a picture of her headstone with

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his cell phone but there wasn't enough light, so Julia and I shined the screens of our phones on it until Devon finally got the snapshot he wanted. Only then did he quiet down.

"Look," I said, "her headstone says she was 'Called Back'—you know, just called back."

Julia answered, "I remember she wrote, 'Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me; the carriage held but just ourselves, and immortality.' She paused and added, 'Death could arrive quickly back then. We don't think very much about dying nowadays, do we? We always imagine a doctor can save us. Maybe if we thought we could die at any moment, we'd live our lives differently.'"

A cool breeze blew through the trees. "This place is starting to suck," said Devon, "I am so out of here. Are you with me, baby?" Julia hesitated, but turned and followed Devon.

The three of us left Emily to immortality and walked back along the cinder path toward the Mobile station and the town. Julia and Devon walked hand-in-hand and I followed several steps behind. Devon fussed some more with his cell phone and announced that he had just posted Emily's headstone on Facebook. Now he was tweeting all his friends to take a look.

