



SHORT STORY

# A Terror

Jeffrey Ford

*illustration by* **John Jude Palencar**

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Emily woke suddenly, in the middle of the night, sitting straight and gasping as if finally breaching the surface of Puffer's Pond. The last thing she could remember was the shrill cry of the 6:00 a.m. whistle from the factory down Main Street in The Crossing. Then a sudden shuddering explosion behind her eyes; a shower of sparks.

She pulled back the counterpane and moved to the edge of the bed. There, she rested; her bare feet on the cold floor, letting the night's hush, like between the heavens of storm, settle

her. Only when a fly buzzed against the windowpane did she remember everything.

Her health had been bad, her spirit low. She'd felt so weak for days on end that she could barely make it out into the garden to cull wilted blossoms. Her pen, which usually glided over a page, sowing words to correspondents or conjuring a poem, had become a weight nearly too burdensome to bear. At her father's insistence, the doctor had come the previous week and demanded to examine her. She'd reluctantly allowed it, in her way. He stood in the upstairs hallway, peering through the partially open door of her room as she shuffled past the entrance, back and forth, three times, fully clothed. He'd called out to her, "Emily, how can I diagnose anything other than a case of mumps in this manner?" but she was loathe to see him, to have him or any other stranger to the Homestead near her.

All that had somehow passed, though, and she no longer felt a slave to gravity. Gone was the perpetual headache like the beating of a drum, gone the labored rasping for breath. That frantic confusion of thought that had plagued her seemed only a fading nightmare, as if now, at the start of autumn, there'd been a spring cleaning in her mind. Before standing, she took stock to make sure she wasn't deluding herself, but no, she felt calm and rested. She stood and stretched, noticing a dim reflection of her loose white nightgown in the window glass, a floating specter that made her smile.

Moonlight sifted in through the two windows and showed her the way to her writing table. There, she lit the taper in the pewter candlestick and took it up to lead her through the darkened house. She wanted to let them know that she'd recovered from her spell. Turning right, down the hallway, she stopped first at Lavinia's room. A tapping at the door brought no response. She rapped louder, but still couldn't raise Vinnie from sleep. Quietly, she opened the door and crossed the dark expanse. Bringing the candlestick down in order to light her sister's form, she was surprised to find the bed still made, empty. She left that room and hurried further down the hall to her parents'. Her mother had been in the poorest health, and Emily was reluctant to wake her, but concern for Vinnie overcame her caution and she knocked heavily three times. Silence followed.

The raised lantern revealed her parents' bed to also be empty, still made from the day. She hurried back up the hall to the top of the stairs and called out for her father. The glow of the candle only reached halfway down the steps. Beyond was a quiet darkness from which no answer came. She felt the nettle sting of fear in her blood and called again, this time for Carlo, her dog. At any other time the Newfoundland would have been right by her side. Slowly, she backed away and returned to her room. She set down the candlestick on

her writing table and stepped toward the bed. After a quick look over each shoulder, and a moment of just listening, she pulled the nightgown off and tossed it on her pillow. She was paler than the garment she discarded, glowing within the glow of the candlelight. From the closet, she removed her white cotton day dress from its hanger and slipped it on with nothing beneath. She found her walking boots in the shadow at the end of the bed and guided her bare feet into them while standing. Not bothering to tie the laces, she picked up the candlestick and left the room.

The untied boots made a racket on the steps—better, she thought, than having to utter a warning to whatever revelation lurked in the dark. She discovered that the clock on the mantel in the downstairs parlor had stopped at 2:15. Stillness reigned in every room, from her father’s library to the kitchen. She fled to the conservatory, to her gardens, for comfort. As soon as she crossed the threshold from the house into the growing room, the aroma of the soil soothed her. An Aeolian harp in the one open window made music, and she turned to the plants, desperate for a moment’s distraction.

It seemed to her like it had been weeks since the last time she’d inspected the exotics. September had definitely come and was drawing the summer out of blossoms. The peonies, gardenias, jasmine drooped dejectedly, their closed petals half-wilted. The summer gentian were long shriveled, and she knew she must pick them before they fell in order to make the purple tea she’d dreamed of. Resting the candle in a patch of thyme, she leaned over pots of oregano to reach the plants and pinch the desiccated flowers from their stems. Only when she had a handful did she recall that her family had vanished in the night. She shook her head, muttering recriminations at herself, put the petals in the pocket of her dress, and blew out the candle. Her eyes had adjusted to the moonlit night.

Before leaving through the door at the end of the conservatory, she grabbed from a peg the tippet of tulle she often wrapped around her shoulders when walking or working in the outdoor gardens. It was a flimsy wrap, and did little to warm her against the wind that shook the trees in the orchard. She thought of it more as a familiar arm around her shoulders. She kept to the path and called out in a whisper for her father and then Vinnie.

Upon reaching the heart of the gardens, she rested upon the log bench her brother, Austin, had built when just a boy. She resolved to go next door to The Evergreens, Austin’s house, and get help. She had a choice to either reach it by traversing a lonely thicket or going round to the street. For the first time ever, she chose the street.

She hadn’t been in front of the Homestead in over a year, and the thought of being seen drained her will. She found it ever preferable to be in her room, sitting at her writing table,

watching, through the wavy window glass, the traffic of Main Street. For long stretches in the afternoon, before she’d put pen to paper again, she’d watch her neighbors come and go. Her imagination gave her their names and their secrets, but she felt in her bones that only at a distance could she know them.

It was different when the children came into the yard and stood beneath her window. They could smell that she’d been baking. When the cookies cooled, she’d slip them in a crude envelope she made from butcher wrap and then attach a parachute of green tissue paper her mother had been saving and forbade anyone to use. There’d be three or four children on the lawn, looking up at the white form behind the glass, a mere smudge of a phantom. Opening the window, she’d say nothing, but launch the cookies, the green paper cupping the air. The parcel would float gracefully down into their grasping hands. They’d hear her breathy laughter, the window would slam shut, and they’d scurry in fear.

She opened the wrought iron gate of the fence that ran between the property and the sidewalk, cringing with the squeal of its hinges. Looking around, she waited for someone or something to come at her out of the dark. She left the gate open so as not to make it cry again and headed right, toward The Evergreens. The wind pushed against her and dry leaves scraped the street. She shifted the tippet on her shoulders but it could do no better. It was only early September, yet she smelled a hint of snow and felt winter in her brain. A line from a poem she’d written surfaced, and she spoke it under her breath: “Great streets of silence led away . . .”

She’d taken no more than fifty steps, head down, anticipating the comfort she’d find in the presence of Austin and the arms of his wife, Susan, when from the street behind her rose the sound of horses’ hooves, the clickety-whir of carriage wheels. The noise slowed and then stopped her; zero at the bone. She dared not turn to look, and hoped the late-night travelers would pass her without notice. From the corner of her left eye she saw the contrivance pull just ahead of her and stop. It was an elegant black brougham with a driver’s seat, a cab, and two white horses dappled with dark spots like a leopard’s markings.

Emily turned and lifted her head but couldn’t make out the driver beyond his silhouette. He was dressed in a heavy coat, collar up, a wide-brimmed hat, and gloves. He turned and lit the two lanterns that were attached to the front of the cab and then resumed his slumped posture. The door swung open and a male voice called out of the dark compartment, “Miss Emily Dickinson?” She blushed as she always did when confronted by a stranger. A man stepped out of the brougham. She took two steps back.

In that instant, she hoped and then thought for certain it

was Sam Bowles, editor of *The Springfield Republican* and her clandestine correspondent. His stream of letters had dried up since his wife had discovered that he and Emily referred to her as “the hedgehog.” Emily missed him so dearly since his departure for the sanatorium to treat his nervous condition. It would be like him to surprise her with his return in this way. But just as quickly she saw the features weren’t Bowles’, and her joy curdled.

It was a gentleman, finely dressed in a black tailcoat and trousers, a spotless white shirt. There was a lovely white rose in his lapel. He wore leather gloves and carried a walking stick. The last she dared to take in was his face, which was adorned by a thin mustache but otherwise smoothly shaven. His eyes were dark yet glimmered with the light of the lanterns. His smile was, considering her anxiety, enormously appealing. He took a gold watch from his vest pocket and held it on its chain up close to his eyes. “We’re running late,” he muttered, as if to himself, but loud enough for her to hear. This fact didn’t seem to distress him in the least. In fact, he smiled more broadly.

Her manners obliterated, she called out louder than she’d intended, “Who are you?”

The gentleman stepped up out of the street and onto the sidewalk. “I’m nobody, who are you?” he said and laughed. “You know me,” he added.

He wore some subtle cologne that reminded her exactly of the scent of the garden at the height of summer. The chill left her immediately and her breathing eased. “What do you want?” she asked, now more relaxed but still with a fading memory that she’d meant to be defensive.

“I’m here to bring you where you need to go,” he said. “I know you’re busy so I’ve taken it upon myself to come for you.”

“I’m only going up the street to my brother’s house.”

“Oh, no, Miss Dickinson, you’ll be going much farther than that.”

“Please. I’m in a hurry. An emergency.”

He took the glove off his left hand and held it in his right. She was incredulous at the effrontery when he reached down and lightly clasped her fingers. At his touch a blast of cold, like a January wind, ran through her body, lodging in her mind and causing a sudden confusion. He had no right to touch her. She meant to protest, to pull her hand away, but every time forgot what she’d intended and then remembered and forgot again.

“If I might call you Emily?” he said in a soothing voice.

“How civil,” she thought while still searching within herself for the panic she expected. The cold that had invaded her slowly diffused into a sense of utter calm more comforting than an afternoon with Susan and the new baby. He gave a

half-bow and led her toward the brougham as if her fears about him had never existed. She stepped off the curb convinced that a journey was precisely what was needed.

Emily woke to the movement of the carriage. The shades were up and the sunlight shone through the window to her left. She pushed against the hard bench to straighten her posture and yawned.

“You’ll want to see this,” said the gentleman, sitting opposite her.

He smiled cordially and her spine stiffened, a scream rendered numb fell to the bottom of her throat. He pointed out the sunlit window and his gaze insisted she look. The view was dizzying as the rig sped madly through town. She thought they were caught up in a twister, but then she was able to identify a section of street, and the whizzing scenery slowed to a crawl, as if it and not the carriage were moving. The sidewalks were empty in the late afternoon light, and the aroma of the oyster bar downstairs in the Gunn Hotel pervaded the cab. The very next thing she noticed was the spire of the First Congregational Church, and that was all wrong, for it should have been in the opposite direction.

They went a few more yards down the road and, impossibly, were passing the grounds of Amherst Academy. Whereas the church and hotel were steeped in the summer heat, the three-story school was surrounded by trees whose leaves had gone golden. There were children sitting on the steps of the building and some playing Ring A Rosie in the field out front. Emily remembered that the school had closed just that year, as a new public school had been built. She wondered what had brought the old place back to life. As the carriage rolled by, the children turned in the ring and she glimpsed the laughing face of her second cousin, Sophia.

She gasped and closed her eyes, averting her gaze from the window. “It can’t be,” she said.

“What’s that?” asked her traveling companion.

“My cousin, Sophia. She died of typhus when we were children.”

“You don’t understand yet, do you?”

“You’re taking me to my family, I thought.”

“In a sense,” he said.

“But then what is all this, this journey through the town all crossways and confusing?”

“You’re taking the tour, Emily. Everybody gets the tour.”

“The tour of what?” she begged, her voice raised.

“Why, your life, of course. A little summing up before nesting down into your alabaster chamber.”

“How do you come to use my private words?”

“I can see you’re beginning to see now,” he said.

She turned quickly and caught a glimpse of Mount Holyoke Academy, miles away from Amherst, in the early evening,

and right after it Amherst Town Hall, with its giant clock lit by morning light.

She looked back at him and asked, "What happened?"

"It comes to all, my dear. You were weak and had one of your seizures and . . . well . . . I have my job to do."

"But Vinnie and Mother and Father?"

"Oh, they're all as well as when you last saw them. It'll be a while more before they get the tour."

"I want to say goodbye to them." Tears formed in her eyes.

He shrugged and opened his gloved hands as if to indicate there was nothing that could be done.

"Where are we going?"

The gentleman banged on the ceiling of the cab with his cane, and the horses instantly set into a gallop. "Toward eternity," he said.

She fell back into the corner of the bench, her face turned toward the window. It was night, no stars visible. Only the bumping of the carriage and the sound of the horses' hooves gave any indication they were moving. They traveled on for what seemed hours and hours, and then she blinked and it was as if they'd arrived in a moment. In the carriage lantern's glow, she could see they'd halted in front of the Amherst Town Tomb, a stone structure built into the earth with a grassy hill of a roof and its cornice in the ground, like a sinking house.

"You are Death," said Emily.

Her fellow traveler sat in shadow. "Call me Quill." He leaned forward so that she could see his face and nodded. "Go ahead. I know you have questions."

Emily knew there was no point in trying to escape or cry out. Although she was terrified, her curiosity was intact. "Which direction am I heading once I'm interred?"

"That's the thing," said Quill, lighting a thin cigar. He swung open the carriage door to blow the smoke out. "I've got nothing to do with that. I don't know what happens after. That will always remain a mystery to me. My specialty is the moment *of*, so to speak, an entire life squeezed down into a flyspeck on the windowpane of the universe. I wish I could tell you more."

"I've done bold things in my life, as quiet as it might have seemed."

"You don't have to convince me, Emily," he said. "I know everything you've done and thought. You've nothing to be ashamed of. Even the falling sickness you tried to hide. It was nothing more than some twisted little knot in your brain work. You and Julius Caesar, my dear. Two emperors, one of men and one of words."

"My secret afternoons?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "I just deliver the spent to their rest."

"But why am I being put into the Town Tomb? It's only for

the bodies of those who die in winter when the ground is too hard to dig a grave."

The gentleman clasped the cigar between his teeth and then removed his left glove with his right hand. He snapped his fingers. "There, look now," he said as he pulled the glove back on his hand.

She peered out the carriage window at a snowy scene, the wind howling, drifts having instantaneously formed around the entrance to the tomb.

Quill took a drag on his cigar and tossed it out the door of the cab. As he spoke his words traveled on curling smoke.

*The brain is just the weight of God,  
For, lift them, pound for pound,  
And they will differ, if they do,  
As syllable from sound.*

"You see what I mean?" he asked. "It's metaphorical."

"What is?" she said.

"Everything. The world," he told her. "Come now, let's get to it." He reached his gloved hand out.

She appreciated his gentleness, his friendly manner, but still she pressed her back against the seat and didn't reach to meet his touch. "I'm only thirty-one. A dozen unfinished poems right now await me in my dresser drawer." Her breathing grew frantic.

"Unlike you, Emily, I never tell it slantwise."

"Is there nothing?"

He sat silently for a moment, and then reached out, grabbed the carriage door by the handle, and swung it shut. The sound of it latching brought a change to the scene outside the window. They were no longer in front of the tomb. It was early autumn again, twilight, and the carriage was moving along Russell Street, west, through Hadley, harvest fields to either side.

"Are you much for deals, Miss Dickinson?" asked Quill.

"Deals?" she asked.

"Yes, it so happens I'm in need of a poet. If you'll help me, I'll erase this evening and not bother you again until, uh . . ." He paused and reached into his jacket pocket for a small notebook. Flipping the pages, he finally landed on one and stopped. Running his finger down a list of names, he said, "You'll have another quarter century. It's the best I can do."

"You're saying I can go home?"

"Yes, when we're finished with my errand. It's somewhat dangerous and there's a chance you still might wind up in the tomb if things go awry, but this is the only way."

Emily remembered from her reading of fairy tales the dangers of deals with Death, but she was flattered that he knew her as a poet. "What do I have to do?"

“I want you to help me kill a child,” he said.

She shook her head vehemently.

“Hear me out, Miss Dickinson, hear me out,” said Quill, and tapped his stick twice on the carriage floor.

“Speak,” she said.

“First, keep in mind what I told you about the world being made of metaphor. I know you’re an adherent of reality, a devotee of science. ‘Microscopes are prudent in an emergency,’ you write. Yes, sound advice, but there are those moments of—shall I call it magic? Sorcery? The supernatural, let us say . . .

“You mean something like a coach carrying Death, pulling up to take you hither and yon?”

“Well put,” he said. “Now, this is where things stand—there’s a child, a boy, who has for all intents and purposes died, succumbed to scarlet fever. But his mother has cast a spell upon him to keep him living.”

“Can this be real?” she asked.

“It’s real. I’m speaking of the power of words. Your father, a devout preacher, would be disappointed in you, not to mention what Reverend Wadsworth might think. In Genesis, God spoke the world and all that’s in it. He said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was.”

“Sophistry,” she said. “But go on.”

“The fact that I’m prevented from taking the child has caused all manner of problems. In fact, I’d not have had to come for you so early if it wasn’t for this one boy—you, and a dozen more whose times were not nigh. I’ve got to compensate for the aberration. It’s not right.”

“Why a poet?”

“The spell has to be undone. I’m not sure how, but word magic, I’m guessing, can best be subdued with words. You know, I almost decided to snatch Walt Whitman instead.”

Emily winced. “The man’s pen has dysentery.”

“For me, there’s a method to his madness,” said Quill. “Like you, he writes about my work quite a bit. He writes that the grass is ‘the beautiful uncut hair of graves.’ Now that’s the spirit. He writes, ‘And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.’ You can see why I appreciate the gentleman.”

“Please, allow Mr. Whitman the honor.”

“For this task, though, I need a surgeon not a dervish.”

She turned again to look out the window and noticed the road was lined with trees. “Where are we?”

“Just beyond Holyoke, heading toward the Horse Caves. The woman in question, the Widow Cremint, has a fine old home there in a clearing just a few hundred yards off the road. It’s recently come to my attention that she’s been advertising for domestic help in town. We will apply for the positions—a governess for the child and a laborer. No one else will dare

to apply. They’ve all heard rumors and know what she is. I spread those rumors myself in the guise of a traveling preacher. She’ll have to take us on.”

“You’re sure?”

“Nothing’s a certainty, but I’ve been doing this for millions of years.”

“Oh, my,” said Emily, and brought her open palm to her mouth. “I just remembered one time when a very old woman came to the door of my father’s house inquiring where she might find lodging in Amherst. This was when I still answered the door. I gave her directions that would eventually lead her to the cemetery, and told myself, this way she wouldn’t have to move more than once in a year.” She shook her head. “How I laughed at that mischief. I was laughing at myself.”

She looked up for his reaction and noticed some commotion on his shadowed side of the compartment. There was a sound like the flapping of wings, and then something flew toward her. She closed her eyes and brought her arms up.

“Gather yourself,” said Quill.

Emily lowered her arms and opened her eyes to morning sunlight. She blinked and then focused on a set of steps before her. When her gaze widened, she took in what she could see of a large, sprawling house that seemed to surpass the Homestead in size but not in upkeep. White paint was peeling, porch railing supports were missing, and one of the front windows had a meandering crack traversing its pane.

The suddenness of day forced her to adjust her balance, and she took a step back and then one forward. Quill, somehow she knew it was Quill, although he was no longer the gentleman of the brougham, stood next to her in front of the door. He was older, tired-looking, with a puffy, wrinkled face and white hair. His drab jacket and trousers were on the verge of tattered. She looked down and saw that she was now wearing a dark blue day dress, but thankfully her walking boots were her own.

“I wear white,” she said.

“Not for this,” he said, and stepped forward to rap on the door. “All that white you wear; I have a theory that it’s symbolic of the blank page.”

“Think again, Mr. Quill,” she said.

“I hope you don’t mind, I’ve supplied you with undergarments. White, by the way.”

“I’ll treat them like a blank page,” she said, and noticed now that he was carrying a large sack over his shoulder.

The door opened and a tall young woman stood before them. Quill stepped forward and said, “Good day, Mrs. Cremint. I heard in town that you were looking for a laborer and a woman to watch your child. Allow me to introduce myself: I’m John Gullen and this is my daughter, Dagmar.”

Emily wondered if the witch would know there was

treachery behind Quill’s smile. She averted her gaze, but not before noticing the woman’s voluminous hair and the inordinate length of her neck. When Emily looked down, she realized that she was wearing the very same blue day dress that Mrs. Cremint wore.

“You, there,” said the woman. Emily looked up. “Do you have any experience with children? Have you cared for them before?” Her tone was demanding, and the poet was too nervous to answer. She merely nodded.

“We have a letter of recommendation from our last employer, Jessup Halstone, Albany, New York. A very wealthy and well-respected gentleman,” said Quill. He handed Mrs. Cremint a piece of paper, folded in half. The woman took it and read through it quickly. She handed it back to Quill.

“You can see the place needs work,” she said, her voice softening. “I’ll take you on. But I want the young lady here—Dagmar, is it?—to know that my child is very frail. He has a serious condition that the doctors cannot diagnose. I should say, those from outside might think his demeanor something strange. If she thinks she can bring herself to treat him as she would any other child, she can have the position.”

“I understand,” said Emily.

Mrs. Cremint stepped beyond the doorway, approached Quill, leaned forward, and sniffed. She paused for a long spell as if contemplating his aroma while the breeze, laced with pine, played in the surrounding oaks and a chime sounded in the corner of the porch. Then it was Emily’s turn, and the woman drew closer than the poet could tolerate. A lump formed in her throat but she dared not swallow. She feared that at any second, she’d tremble and give herself away. A few more moments of deep thought and the lady said, “Come in. I’ll show you to your rooms.”

She led them down a hallway, Quill directly behind Mrs. Cremint and Emily following. The hall they traversed was lined with the most magnificent paneling, a butterscotch wood with a thousand dark knots visible. There were daguerreotypes lining the walls; sienna portraits of an older gentleman with prodigious mutton chops and dressed in a military uniform. “The pictures are of my late husband, General Cremint,” the woman called back. “You may call me Sabille.”

“Sabille, very good,” said Quill, and the party turned left into a large parlor. The furniture was plush and the books and figurines were arranged neatly on the shelves, but all was cast with an indefinable dinginess, as if the very atmosphere and light had been corrupted. Emily wondered if nature itself might be in revolt against a child denied his death.

After Sabille had shown them to their separate rooms, and she’d briefly haggled with Quill over the terms of employment, she came to Emily and said, “Come and meet Arthur.”

Her tone was far more pleasant than before, almost conspiratorial. She led Emily back toward the front of the house and then mounted the steps leading to the second floor. “As you can see, there’s a lot that needs to be done here. I just haven’t had the strength to do everything since my husband died, and also watch the child. The accounts alone—my husband was a well-to-do gentleman—have been neglected, and I need to give them attention before I lose money. Your father will be a godsend in reviving the house.”

At the end of the upstairs hallway, there was a door that Sabille waited at as Emily caught up to her. The woman reached out and gently touched the poet’s shoulder to draw her near. She whispered, “The boy is very frail, very frail. He likes to hear stories and to play with his wooden soldiers. You’ll see that his vitality diminishes with the day. By late afternoon, you’ll not recognize him as the child of the morning.” She opened the door.

The room was circular, no doubt a turret Emily had not caught a glimpse of in front of the house. There were five windows evenly spaced along the circumference. There was a small bed, a bookcase, a dresser, and a play table with a child’s chair, all resting upon a large braided rug. In the miniature chair, there was a boy with his back to Emily. The first things that drew her eye were the intermittent clumps and strands of brown hair on the otherwise bald head. The sight of it depleted her.

He wore a red flannel shirt and a pair of overalls; moccasins on his feet. There must have been a hundred wooden soldiers, each the size of a thumb, arranged on the table as if on a parade ground, readied for inspection. The boy held one in each hand and mumbled to himself. Sabille cleared her throat and spoke. “Arthur, I want you to meet someone.”

The boy turned at the sound of his mother’s voice, and Emily desperately tried to stifle her astonishment, knowing her life depended on it. Still, an expression of awe escaped her lips, and she instantly recovered by turning the sound into the boy’s name. “Arthur, I’m Emily and I’ve come to keep you company.”

His complexion was tinged green and there were scabs and oozing scrapes across his cheeks and forehead. The whites of his eyes were yellowed and the pupils faded to white. Behind his crusted lips, his teeth were brown pegs. He looked to his mother and grunted. Cautiously, he left his chair and stepped across the room to hug Sabille’s legs.

Emily lowered herself on her haunches to the child’s height. The boy smelled like a muddy streambed, and there was something shiny dribbling from the side of his mouth. “I’m Emily,” she said again. She reached out to take the child’s scabbed hand, but at the last second he drew it quickly away.

His sudden movement frightened her and she reared backward, nearly falling over. As she stood, he opened his horrid mouth at her. A second later, she realized he was laughing.

“A joke?”

Arthur nodded.

“Well,” said Sabille, “I see you’ve got an understanding. I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. The boy went back to his chair and soldiers. When the door closed, Emily took a seat on the bed and watched as if she was watching a neighbor through wavy glass on Main Street. The child seemed some kind of little beast sprung up from the forest floor. She worked to reconcile this with the fact that she could detect a child’s spirit within the rotting husk. As horrid a figure as the boy cut, something about him reminded her of Austin and Susan’s Ned, just born in June. *And I’m to kill him with words*, she thought.

Arthur mumbled continuously, the two soldiers in hand, facing his troops, for over an hour. She waited for something to happen, for war to break out or for the wooden men to suggest an adventure, but the game, in which he seemed entirely invested, was all talk. She listened to make out his words and heard nothing but low barks and burbling mumbles, occasionally a heave, like a fatalist’s sigh.

“Arthur,” she called to him. “What’s happening to the soldiers?”

The boy stared at her over his shoulder. Emily waved to him. Then he turned, put the two soldiers in their empty places in the parade ground revue, and walked to the bookcase. He took a book down. She was horrified at his approach. She knew he would want her to take him in her lap and read him a story. No sooner had that realization dawned than she noticed his flesh had gone from a pale green to a light morbid blue. A clump of his hair fell out as he came across the room, a thin lock tumbled off his shoulder.

He held the book out and grunted. She took the volume from him and then, holding her breath so as not to smell him, she reached out to take him into her lap. His flesh was the slick consistency of rotting mushrooms. When she began to read, she had to eventually breathe, and his aroma conjured in her mind an image of her holding a boy-sized toad. When Arthur made noise and pointed to the book’s illustrations, she heard it as croaking.

Only a chapter into the story of Saint George and the Dragon, the boy fell asleep in her arms. His stillness won over her revulsion, and she grew accustomed to his weight and scent. She thought of a spring day a few years earlier when last she’d gone out walking. Carlo was at her side. Just beyond town, the meadow was full of black-eyed Susans. The day was warm and the sun bright. Across the meadow she and the dog moved in among the birch trees and continued on for a

mile or more. As she approached a pond, leaves floating upon its surface, she felt a sharp pain in her breast, and woke to Arthur trying to bite her through her day dress.

She cried out and quickly set him on the floor. He showed her his big mouth full of brown shards and she smacked his face. The boy crumpled down onto the rug. She called out his name in a whisper, so as not to let his mother hear. He sprang up onto all fours, gave her another smile, and crawled in circles around the table and chair. To her horror, she noticed her hand print in pale green against the darker blue of his flesh. For the rest of the afternoon, he kept his distance from her and growled if she made any overture of contact.

Luckily, by dinner her handprint had vanished into the overall violet of his face. His flesh seemed to have come unstrung, sagging down in ripples around his neck and making cuffs at his wrists. His breathing had grown labored, and he cried out occasionally as if in pain. He sat, at the head of the dining room table, strapped into a high chair that was much too small for him. Sabille sat to his right and Emily to his left. For the sixth time his mother lifted a spoon of gruel into his mouth, forcing it far down his throat. The child gagged the portion into his stomach and a moment later Emily lifted the half-full bowl she held in order to catch his vomit. The process was repeated with each spoonful. “It’s the only way,” Sabille repeated as if saying a prayer. Emily was desperate to scream, “The dead don’t eat,” but held her peace.

At the other end of the table was Quill in the guise of the old laborer, John Gullen. He watched the bizarre feeding, seemingly unable to touch his stew. At one point, Emily looked at him and caught his eye. In her mind she heard his young gentlemen’s voice say, “I’ve seen few things grimmer than this.”

“I’m nauseous,” Emily told him in her thoughts.

“At bedtime tonight, try to be near enough to them to hear the spell. If I have to spend another day here chopping wood, I’ll expire.”

The last spoonful had been loaded and returned, and Sabille said, “Dagmar, if you’ll clean him and bring him upstairs in a minute, I’ll prepare his bed.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Emily.

Quill stood when the Widow Cremint left the table. Emily set to washing up Arthur, who was slick with gruel and vomit. She gagged more than once in the process. The entire time she worked on him, the boy mumbled at a furious pace, and every now and then released a weak howl of pain. When she was finished cleaning him, he pulled his thumbnail off. It came away from its bed easy as breathing. He dropped it into her open palm, and she put it in her pocket. She hugged him to her and thought she felt him kiss the spot he’d earlier bitten.

Sabille stripped the day’s clothes from Arthur’s sagging,

violet body, and then she and Emily fitted him into the felt bag he slept in. His head stuck out of the end of the sack, and a drawstring was tied snugly around his neck. Carrying him to the bed, Sabille called him "my little caterpillar." When she set his head upon the pillow, strands of hair fell free. Emily waved and wished the boy a sweet night's sleep. She stepped back but didn't leave the room.

"You may go now," said Sabille.

"Yes, ma'am," said Emily, and exited but made sure to only close the door partway. She hid just outside in the darkened upstairs hallway and waited. Through the sliver of an opening, she watched as the mother knelt next to the bed, cooing and shushing the child who rocked frantically from side to side. After a time Arthur finally lay still. She watched Sabille lean over, her mouth near the child's ear.

Emily turned her own ear to the opening. Sabille's whisper was so very low, but each of the words of the spell registered in the poet's mind with utter clarity, like the tap of a pin against a crystal goblet. There were three stanzas and she thought she knew them. She pulled away from the door and leaned back against the wall. "I've got it," she thought, hoping he would hear her.

His voice sounded behind her eyes. "Good. Now *run*," he yelled, and the words echoed through even her most distant memories. "Run to the road."

She slipped away from the open door and crept down the stairs, easing her boots down on each step so as not to be discovered. When she reached the door, her fear banished caution. She flung it open and trounced across the porch, knowing now she'd be heard. Emily hadn't run since she was a girl, but her walking in the woods with Carlo allowed her to keep a steady pace. She dashed along the winding, tree-lined path that led to the road. Only ten yards into her flight, she heard the ungodly baying of some creature. She ran faster, but before long heard the thing galloping behind her.

She pictured a muscular, sleek animal with six legs. When she turned to steal a look, she saw it in the moonlight. It was no beast, but the gentleman in the daguerreotypes, General Cremint. He was naked and wielding a saber. Both the sounds of galloping and baying issued from his open mouth. His eyes were missing, just two black holes. When he noticed Emily glance at him, Sabille's voice came forth, "*Spy*," she screamed. "*Spy*."

The old man gained on her, and she could feel the breeze of his flashing sword at the back of her neck. Up ahead she saw the end of the path and the silhouette of the brougham, waiting. Just then the carriage's lanterns blossomed with light. She was tiring, her legs cramping, and she heard Quill calling from the open door, "Lap the miles, Miss Dickinson. Lick

the valleys up." She pushed harder but felt the sword tip slice through her hair. The brougham was only feet away.

As she reached for Quill's outstretched hands, Emily saw the driver stand in his box, his arm moving in a sudden arc. She heard the crack of his whip. General Cremint whimpered and fell behind. Quill grabbed her then beneath the arms and lifted her into the brougham. The horses sprang forth, the door of the carriage slammed closed, and they were off. Emily looked quickly to catch one more view of her assailant, the general, sitting in the road, crying, turning slowly to smoke. She moved to the bench across from Quill. Leaning back, catching her breath, she said, "I've forgotten the spell."

"Don't worry," said Quill, again a young gentleman, the rose still fresh in his lapel. "Once you heard it, *I* was able to hear it, and I've got it. Part of the spell was that every night when she used it on the boy I'd never be able to hear it. Once *you* heard it, though, I could hear it in your thoughts. Sabille is already weak. Evidence of that is the illusion of her dead husband she set on you. She must be going mad."

"An illusion?"

"A deadly illusion, but still conjured from nothing."

"It's inevitable she'll lose the child?" Emily asked.

"Exactly. And now you must get to work on the counter-spell." The brougham came to a halt. She looked out the window to see that they'd returned to the Town Tomb. Again it was snowing and the drifts around the entrance to the sunken house were ever higher.

"Why are we here again? I've done what you asked."

"I certainly didn't recruit you for your running prowess," he said. "You're a poet, and now begins your work. Come see," he said. "I've brought your writing table from home." He'd removed his glove again. His fingers snapped.

She stood in freezing, damp darkness. She heard the wind howling as if at a distance, and then heard the scratch and spark of Quill lighting a match. The flame illuminated his face. He smiled at her, his breath a cloud of steam, and tossed the lit match over his shoulder. A moment later there was a hushed explosion, a sudden burst of flame, and the place came into view. At first she thought she was in a cave, but a moment later realized it was the Town Tomb.

Quill stood warming himself before a fireplace dug into the rock wall. She saw her writing table and chair. "See here," he said, and pointed to a swinging iron bar that could put a cauldron of water over the flame. "I've acquired your gold and white tea set. You can make tea. What type are you partial to? I'm guessing marble."

She glared at him. "Something strong, and I'll need a bottle of spirits."

"Spirits?"

"Whiskey," she said. "I'll need paper and a copy of the spell."

"There you are," he said, and pointed to her writing table, now complete with pen and inkwell and a stack of fresh paper. He turned and pointed again, and a few feet left of the fireplace there stood a wooden bar, a decanter of whiskey, and glasses. "If you need ice, you can go outside," he said. "It will always be winter while you're here."

"What exactly am I to do?"

"Create a counterspell to Sabille's spell."

"How is one to begin on something like this?"

"That's the challenge," said Quill.

"How long do I have?"

"Eternity, or until you succeed."

"Then I go back."

"For twenty-five years," he said.

"It's blackmail," she said.

"Laws don't apply here, Miss Dickinson. Death is no democracy." He walked toward the door of the tomb. "Might as well get started," he said.

"How will I know if I'm even close?"

"That'll be up to you." The huge door of the tomb slid open. As Quill went out, winter came in, snow flying and a wicked chill. With a distinct click, the door closed, and the wind and world were again distant. Emily took her seat at the writing table. She lit the taper in the candlestick for extra light and adjusted the tulle across her shoulders, a meager attempt at protection against the darkness of the tomb. She felt its blind depths like a breathing presence behind her. Lifting the page on which Quill had copied the spell, she noted his clear and elegant handwriting. The paper smelled of saffron.

She read the words of the spell, but nothing registered. It didn't seem to be what she'd heard. Leaning over the scented page, as if to communicate with it as much as read it, she recited its stanzas in a whisper.

*Stir, stir, stir*

*And stay*

*No leave to go away*

*Burn, burn, burn*

*And rise*

*The sun will be your open eyes*

*Stir, stir, stir*

*And stay*

*All of time to love and play.*

After an hour of contemplation, Emily decided that the spell was useless to her. The magic of the words sprang from the

traditions of a culture she knew nothing about. She surmised that her first solution, attempting to rearrange the words of the spell into a poem in order to counteract it, would have no effect. Dogmatic belief in anything was foreign to her. She crumpled the sheet of stanzas, got up, and threw it in the fire. The moment the flames licked the balled sheet black, she felt lighter, like a boat cutting loose its anchor and drifting. She made tea and put whiskey in it.

Sitting, sipping her brew, she noticed that she again wore her own white cotton day dress. She was clear that what she would do was simply write a poem, whatever came to her, and hope that somehow it would have some bearing on the spell. Presentiment, something she'd written about before—"The Notice to the startled Grass that darkness is about to pass"—was to be the order of the long night. She set a sheet of paper in front of her, moistened her pen in the inkwell and then sat there, staring, listening to the blizzard outside, searching for words in its distant shriek. An hour passed, maybe a day or year.

Later, she was brought to by the sound of a groan emanating from the dark back of the tomb where the winter's harvest lay frozen. When the enormous stillness had swallowed the noise, Emily was unsure if she'd really heard it or only heard it in her thoughts. She turned in her chair and looked into the shadows. "Hello?" she called. While she waited for a response, she realized that as long as she'd been in the tomb, she'd not been hungry, she'd not slept, and had no call for a chamber pot. No answer came back from the dark.

She put the tulle around her shoulders and opened the door of the tomb. She was surprised by how easily the enormous weight of it slid back. In a moment the blizzard was upon her. She took two steps out into a drift that reached to her thighs and looked up into the snow-filled night. It wasn't long before the fierce wind forced her to retreat. Once back inside, the tomb door closed, she swung the water cauldron out over the perpetual fire. Tea and whiskey were her only pleasures. She'd noticed that, when she wasn't looking, the decanter refilled itself.

Waiting for the water to come to a boil, she rubbed her hands together in front of the fire, and once they'd warmed she shoved them into her dress pockets. When first she felt the dried gentian petals, she thought them just some scrap of paper she'd jotted a line on at some point. But when she touched the child's nail, she remembered. The water boiled, and she made the tea she'd dreamed about, lacing the brew with a generous shot of whiskey to offset the taste of the boy's nail that twirled atop its plum-colored depths.

In the dream the gentian tea, tasting like the sweetest dirt, had made her mind race, and now too, beneath the ground, her mind raced. Phrases flew, their letters visible, from every

grotto of her mind. She stood at the center of the storm, scythe in hand, cutting through the dross. Eventually she lifted the pen and drew ink. The first line came strong to the paper, and there was a pause—a moment, a day, a year—before she hesitantly began on the second line. Slowly, the poem grew. Midway she sat back and wondered which came first, the words or the visions. Her thoughts circled, and then she leaned forward and resumed her work. When she finished, she read the poem aloud.

*The night woke in me – And I rose  
blindly wandering in a Snow  
To the Sunken house –  
its Cornice – in the ground.  
Parlor of shadows – in the ground  
The distant Wind – a lonely Sound  
Winter’s orphans and Me  
Undoing knots with Gentian tea.*

The instant the last word was spoken, she rejected it; too obvious to undo a spell of life. She crumpled the sheet and tossed it into the fire. A belief in complexity and complication crept into her thoughts and with that the years fell like an avalanche. She drank tea, and stared at the blank sheet, went outside, and listened for groans in the dark back of the tomb. A million times, a place to begin arrived, and she would think of Arthur trapped in his high chair at dinner, and the line would vanish, too insubstantial to survive.

Later, she was brought to her senses by the sound of something shuffling in the dark behind her. She spun in her chair, her heart pounding. It sounded like weary footsteps. Realizing the sound was approaching, she stood and backed against the writing table. Out of the gloom and into the glow of the fireplace, a wasted figure staggered, an old woman, dressed in black, wearing a black muslin cap atop her white hair. Her face was wrinkled and powdered with dust, and there were patches of ice on her brow and sunken cheeks. She clutched a Bible in her crooked hands.

“Hello,” said Emily, surprised as she did so. Even before the old woman stopped and looked up, the poet knew it was the same woman who’d come that time to the house for directions to a place she might stay.

“Excuse me, miss, could you tell me where I might seek lodging in town?” Her voice was low and rumbled in echoes through the tomb. Emily noticed part of the woman’s nose had rotted away and that there was something alive in her glassy left eye by the way it bulged and jiggled.

“Go that way, into the dark,” said the poet and pointed.

“Thank you for your kindness, dear.” The woman turned and shuffled into the shadows.

Emily stood numb from the encounter. “Is the gentian tea still steering my mind?” she whispered.

“No,” came the old woman’s reply from the back of the tomb. “It’s the rising tide of years.”

Some piece of eternity later, she sat with pen poised above paper, her arm aching for how long it had been in that position. She barely recognized anymore the crackle of the fire, the distant wind. The pen’s tip finally touched the blank sheet, and she heard a new sound that distracted her from her words. The nib made a fat black blotch, and she drew her hand back. “What was that noise?” she said. In her loneliness she now spoke all her thoughts. Finally it came again, something outside. “A person shouting?” No, it was the barking of a dog. She leaped up from the chair and rushed to the door of the tomb. Opening it, she stepped out into the blizzard.

Sitting a few feet off, up to his chest in snow, was Carlo, her Newfoundland, a bear of a dog. He barked again and bounded the drifts to reach her. She was overwhelmed and blinked her eyes to be certain he was there. But then she felt his furry head beneath her hand and he licked her palm. It came to her as if in a dream that she was freezing and she stepped back into the tomb. The dog followed. After closing out the winter, she sat in her writing chair, leaning forward, hugging Carlo to her. “You’re good,” she repeated, stroking his head. When she finally let go, the dog backed away and sat staring for a long while. His sudden bark frightened her.

“What?” she asked.

The dog barked three more times and then came to her and took the sleeve of her dress. Carlo tugged at her, long his sign for her to follow. It came to her, with his fourth tug and tenth bark, that he was there to take her back. “You know the way,” she said to him. The dog barked. She turned to face the writing table and lifted her pen. She quickly scribbled on the blotched sheet, “Gone Home. Mercy.” Dropping the pen, she stood and wrapped the tippet around her shoulders. The dog came to her side and she took hold of him by the collar. “Home,” she said, and Carlo led her into the dark back of the tomb.

They walked forever and before long he led her by way of a narrow tunnel back into the world. When the moonlight bathed her, she felt the undergarments Quill had given her vanish like a breeze. The dog led her down a tall hill to the end of Main Street. Walking the rest of the way to the Homestead they encountered no one. Quietly, in the kitchen, she gave Carlo a cookie and kissed him between his eyes. After taking off her boots, she tiptoed up the stairs to her room. She removed the white dress and hung it in the closet. She swam into her nightgown and got back into bed.

As her eyes began to close, she felt a hand upon her shoulder. In her panic, she tried to scream but another hand covered her

mouth. “Shhh, shhh,” she heard in her ear, and feeling cold breath on the back of her neck knew it was Quill. “Lie still,” he said. “Let’s not wake your parents.”

“Leave me alone,” she said. She lay back on the pillow without getting a look at his face.

“I intend to,” he said. “I merely wanted to tell you that the piece you left in the tomb worked the trick. Three simple words were the key to the spell’s lock; a mad but marvelous thing. Arthur is resting peacefully, so to speak.”

“So I owe you nothing.”

“I’d like to ask you a question, if I may.”

“What?”

“All these poems you’ve written and hidden—so many poems. Why?”

While she thought, morning broke and the birds sang in the garden. “Because I could not stop,” she said, and he was gone.

to Harvard. A good deal of her poetry didn’t see publication until the 1950s. There are three books of her poems that were edited by Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, her brother’s mistress, shortly after she passed away, though, and these you can quote with impunity. They’re available at Project Gutenberg. The big issue with them is that they don’t represent Dickinson’s own unique punctuation style (dashes and capitalizations, etc.) but have been tidied up by her early editors to appear more conventional.



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#### AFTERNOTE

In April of 1862, Emily Dickinson struck up a correspondence with the poet and war hero, Thomas Wentworth Higginson in response to an article Higginson published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, offering advice to new poets. In her second letter to him she made this odd statement: “I had a terror – since September – I could tell to none.” She is obviously referring to September of 1861, which is the setting of my story. The poem I’m riffing off of is one of her most famous, “Because I Could Not Stop For Death. . . .” The earliest known version of this poem, of which there are many, was written, as far as I can tell, in 1863. I imagine the “terror” Emily refers to is her experience that plays out in my story. After mulling it for a year, I’ve imagined she decided to capture it in that famous poem.

There is a good deal of excellent source material about Dickinson out there now. Three of the ones I tapped for this fiction are:

*My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Alfred Habegger

*Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family’s Feuds* by Lyndall Gordon (in which Gordon posits the theory that Dickinson suffers from bouts of epileptic seizure)

The Emily Dickinson Museum website: [www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org](http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)

If you are thinking of using the poetry of Emily Dickinson in a piece of fiction, be careful. Harvard owns the copyrights to some of her work and to certain versions of her poems. Anything that was published after 1923 is under copyright