

i told my soul to sing

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finding God with
EMILY DICKINSON

KRISTIN LEMAY



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For E

*Prove it me
That He — loved Men —
As I — love thee —*



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*Let Emily sing for you
because she cannot pray . . .*

—Emily Dickinson to
Louisa and Frances Norcross, 1863



INTRODUCTION

EMILY DICKINSON was a rebel in matters of religion. She gleefully would have added “infidel,” “gypsy,” and “rogue.” She bragged that she was “one of the lingering *bad* ones,” often “surly – and muggy – and cross,” “quite vain,” “*wicked*,” occasionally “a Pagan,” “one of those brands almost consumed,” and long since “past ‘Correction in Righteousness.’” Evidently, she also possessed a sly taste for self-deprecation and irony. On loftier days she’d go so far as to name herself “Eve, alias Mrs. Adam,” “Simon Peter,” even “Barabbas.”

Now, you’ve probably seen that famous picture of Emily Dickinson that stares out from the cover of nearly every book relating to her, including this one: Emily the waif, slim and pale, looking about as bold as a limp piece of lace. Forget that sepia color scheme. She was a redhead. Forget too whatever rumors you might have heard about her broken heart, her melancholy, her obsession with death. While we’re at it, please purge from your memory those polite lines of her poetry that get reprinted on magnets and coffee mugs, foremost among them: “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” and “If I can stop one Heart from breaking / I shall not live in vain,” as well as “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –” and “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me –.” Return to sender. We need to start fresh.

Let’s start, as the biographies do, with her family tree. If we were to trace Emily Dickinson’s spiritual lineage along the Tree of Knowledge, we’d find her forefathers and mothers poised

on the craggy limbs, where the crows stand and—let's be fair—where the songbirds build their nests. There'd be Saul, persecutor turned proselytizer, high in the upper branches, and skeptic Thomas would balance on a wobbly, low bough. Jacob, who sparred with angels and tricked everyone he could, would grip the trunk of this family tree. At its root we'd find Eve, reputed another redhead, who hid from God once her rebellious tastes had blossomed. And it's possible that Lucifer—brightest star in the firmament, first rebel against God—might flicker an instant over the scene, before disappearing with the dawn. Emily asks, "was not temptation the first zest?" To this crowd of doubters, fighters, and faithful infidels Emily Dickinson belongs.

This is not the family in which most scholars or biographers would place the poet they call "Dickinson"—but this book is neither scholarly study nor biography. Although I build gratefully upon such work, I take a more personal tack. In these pages, I call her Emily, because this book tells of two intertwining lives, Emily's and mine, and shares how her poems have led me toward the God she both jabbed at and sought. Through her very struggles with religion, Emily has become for me a sort of unlikely patron saint, and we don't call the saints by their last names.

I am also a redhead. While not much of a rebel, I do struggle with religion. If I were to chart my spiritual path over the last decade, it would look more like an EKG than a slow and steady climb toward grace. Grace Emily dismisses with a shrug as "*unmerited* remembrance – 'Grace' – the saints would call it. Careless girls like me, cannot testify." I'm careless, too, and sympathize. Take, for instance, my spotty record with church:

I've floated in and out of Methodist, Congregational, Lutheran, nondenominational Christian, and Episcopal congregations, but the only church I haven't left is, typically enough, the single one that I can never truly join: a community of monks. Given these spiritual shortcomings, I've come to love Emily for exactly those qualities that might appear to disqualify her for sainthood: impiety, inconsistency, irreverence. Saint Emily, patron of all who wrestle with God.

While much of Emily's life, and a bit of mine, will unfold across these pages and through her poems, let me sketch here the broad brushstrokes to offer some context for what will follow. One of the struggles we face in reading Emily is how the myths and rumors—the reductive biographies that stare from the tags of Emily Dickinson plush dolls—can obscure the genius we meet in her poetry. We'll tackle the cultural perception as we go, debunking myths, piercing misconceptions. But first, here's the short version of the story: rumors, myths, and all.

Emily was born to the prominent Dickinson family on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, which her own family would help to turn into a university town through the creation of Amherst College. She was well educated for a woman of the time, but this is not surprising, since her grandfather championed female education. Yet after one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, she left—some say because of illness, others, homesickness, neurosis, or simply the need (either on her part or theirs) to be with her family.

Once she returned home, Emily never again left the family she simultaneously adored and resisted: her stern father, Edward, and her domestic, fussy mother (another Emily). Her older brother, Austin, was her close confidant in youth,

then married and moved next door. Emily's relationship to Sue, Austin's wife, yields differing views: she's variously called Emily's closest friend, her beloved, her muse, her key reader and editor, as well as something of a manipulative bully. Last, there was Emily's sister, Lavinia, who managed the house as their mother had once their mother no longer could, though Vinnie added more catty impressions of the neighbors and more cats. None of the three Dickinson children ever moved away. With the exception of a few trips to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and two lengthy stays in Cambridge to treat an eye ailment, Emily never traveled.

She also never married, though many readers and biographers speculate about a significant and ultimately failed love that left her wrenched in her late twenties and early thirties—right around the same time she became quite serious about writing poetry, copying hundreds of poems into the hand-sewn books she made to record them. She never published her poems, though ten did appear in print in her lifetime. It's not clear whether they were published with her consent. Before she turned forty, she stopped going much beyond the fenced-in yard. (She'd stopped going to church in the decade before.) Around this time she also took up the habit of wearing only white and refusing to receive visitors. Within the limits of the yard, orchard, and meadows, Emily tended a vast garden and cultivated exotic plants in her greenhouse, having a passion for botany and a skill for horticulture that had endured since her early education. She also, famously, baked.

When she died at fifty-five, her family had little idea of the legacy she'd left behind. Lavinia found nearly eight hundred poems secreted inside a rosewood box and nestled

in the bottom drawer of the cherry dresser in Emily's upper-story room of the family Homestead. When you lift the lid, the box tinkles a tune. Seeing this wealth of poems, Lavinia undertook to publish them. She enlisted Sue (and whether Sue gave help or hindrance depends on whom you ask), as well as Austin's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, and Emily's longtime correspondent, the important man of American letters Thomas Wentworth Higginson. The first volume came out in 1890, the second in 1891, the third in 1896. As letters and poems were collected, the count would climb to nearly eighteen hundred poems and over a thousand letters. As Emily herself said of such unanticipated boons: "The Heaven – unexpected come, / To Lives that thought the Worshipping / A too presumptuous Psalm –."

Such are the broad outlines of Emily's life and early afterlife. Notice how the poetry is tucked in there amid the neurosis, the family dramas, the broken heart, the baking, and the blooms? You'd almost miss it, except that *it* is the reason we care anything about the rest. It wasn't until 1955, when the first complete, nonbowdlerized edition of the poems was printed, that the world realized what it had in Emily Dickinson. In the earlier editions, editors corrected rhymes, adjusted imagery, smoothed syntax, and tidied her punctuation, stanza size, and line breaks. In the decades since the whole of her writing emerged, we've tried to parse what is true about Emily, as well as what is actually on the page.

So, in these pages, I try to figure out what was true about Emily's religious life, what her poems and letters suggest. Oh, and on that topic, here's one more telling fact: Emily insisted that she could not pray.

"Because she cannot pray"

As I've admitted, Emily is an unlikely patron saint for anyone to choose. In her lifetime, the state of her soul was called into question when she staunchly refused to give the public profession of faith that marked conversion, and it was further suspected when she stopped attending church altogether. In the hundred-plus years since her poetry was published, her soul has increasingly been the subject of debate. Was she a Christian? Did she believe in God? If so, how so? If not, why not? And what did her belief consist of—if belief it was—at thirty, at forty, at fifty?

The answers readers give to these questions couldn't be more varied. If you read around at the library or online, you'll find a range of readers assigning Emily to every possible spot on the spiritual spectrum: reluctant Christian, ardent mystic, atheist, agnostic, Buddhist.

Emily's spiritual life inspires so many diverse answers because her poems and letters offer such tricky evidence. Obviously, she's not around to answer our questions, and the record we do have is both sparse and inconsistent. By turns and by moods, Emily challenges, cajoles, cudgels, and coos at the God she dubs "the Foreigner," "that Bold Person, God," "Itself," "the imperceptible," "Tyranny," "a Mastiff," "Old Suitor Heaven," "Vagabond," "Sorcerer from Genesis," and "the Mysterious Bard," among other more generic names, such as "the Sky," "Might," "Deity," and "Omnipotence." And this is not to mention her broad use of those more traditional names for God: Lord, Savior, Maker, Jehovah, Sovereign, Creator, Redeemer, and Almighty. *God* is the thirty-ninth most frequently occurring word in all her poems. As the presence of these names attests, she wrote amply on the

subject, alternately irreverent and pious, sometimes in a single poem, even a single verse. Take the poem with the first lines “Papa above! / Regard a mouse.” It’s a prayer of sorts, spoken to the “Papa above,” but the tongue-in-cheek diction of *papa* and *mouse* keeps it from feeling particularly devout. Is she pointing out the childishness of faith through this mousy charade? Or might her playful tone hint at a true intimacy with her divine “Papa,” the way biblical scholars say Jesus’ intimacy with God is shown by his use of the Aramaic word *abba*, which translates more closely as “dad,” even “daddy,” than the formal “Father”? You could argue the matter many ways, in this poem and many others. The letters, too, leave the most significant questions up for debate: when she wrote, “Home is the definition of God,” does she reveal that God is her home, or the reverse, that an earthly home is god enough for her, no other deity required? *Home* was also a common word she used to refer to heaven, following Jesus, who promised that in his Father’s house there would be many rooms. Emily whispered, a year before she died, “Foxes have Tenements, and remember, the Speaker was a Carpenter –.” Beautiful words, but can we lean on them to know where her home was or who she believed had built it for her?

Since Emily did not publish, she was the primary, often the sole reader she imagined for the majority of her writings, and consequently she had no need to explain her shifting moods or cryptic stances to herself. Besides, even in the case of published authors, short lyric poems are not held to the same standards of consistency and continuity as longer epic works. Whereas John Milton aimed to make a “great Argument” across the many books of *Paradise Lost*, to “assert Eternal Providence / And justify the wayes of God to men,” and whereas John

Calvin erected an edifice in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Donne wrote lyric poems that were lusty and devout without striving for consistency. Short lyric poems intend only to capture the intensity of a lyric moment. If those moments lasted, there would be no need to preserve them in verse.

Emily's correspondence isn't much clearer when it comes to revealing her soul. Though mostly in prose (verses do creep in between the lines and amid the pages) and written for specific recipients, the letters obscure as much as they reveal. Depending on the person she addresses, Emily can sound angry, indifferent, hopeful, scornful, skeptical, teasing, or full of trust about faith. Sometimes, she'll sound many of these ways in a single letter. In this Emily appears every bit as complex and self-contradicting as the rest of us. None of us writes our personal correspondence as a *summa theologica*, a coherent system of belief, in which we develop a logical, ordered position. And then, of course, time tromps on, bringing changes, fluctuations, shifts. Across her life, Emily returned to older works and revised them—sometimes after a significant gap. It seems that her poems lived for her long past the moment of composition. In her correspondence with the publisher Thomas Niles, from Roberts Brothers in Boston (who later was impressed enough to ask for “a M.S. collection of your poems”), she reached back twenty years to select a poem she was willing to share. Whatever one poem or letter might reveal of Emily's thoughts at the moment of its composition, we have no guarantee that she still thought so after one year, not to mention thirty years. We also have no guarantee that she didn't.

Finally, in case this scenario is not complicated enough, we have to account for the likelihood that, in any given poem,

Emily is using irony or impersonation, both of which she loved. She cautioned one of her most important readers—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would eventually help publish her poems after her death—not to draw a one-to-one parallel between the voice that speaks in the poems and the author who wrote them: “When I state myself, as Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person.” While she may simply hope to protect herself from any aspersions (some poems get pretty risqué), Emily also wanted to be clear: that seemingly transparent letter, *I*, does not necessarily point to her, the poet, at all.

This challenge doesn’t discourage me. Rather I’m buoyed up by Emily’s inconsistency on the page. When I read tales of martyrs or tomes of the Church Fathers, the firm assurance of those voices makes me realize how I waver between the poles of belief and doubt. So I find Emily’s mutability consoling. For her, as for me, Christ is one day “the Stranger,” then the next, “the Savior.” She pillories God one moment as “Judgment,” prays to God the next as “Love,” and in a third mood announces: “That Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found –.” And so it goes with me.

Despite her wavering, I do make some confident claims here about Emily’s interior life. While we will never be able to itemize, year by year, Emily’s deep-held religious beliefs, no reader of her poetry and letters can deny certain shifting trends in her views across her lifetime. Some ideas, like a childhood view of heaven (marble gates, shiny white-robed men and women), slip away. Other ideas grow in conviction. That the self is eternal Emily became increasingly sure. While there is room for doubt about some of the spiritual stances I

claim for Emily in this book, there is also evidence that they are true.

In the pages that follow, I don't aim to present a scholarly account of Emily Dickinson's religious life—there are already several quite wonderful studies, such as Roger Lundin's *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* and James McIntosh's *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown*—but rather to tell how reading Emily's poetry and letters has infused and enriched my beliefs. As she has informed my religious struggles, so my struggles have illuminated aspects of her writings and life different from those the scholarly accounts stress. The portrait I etch here is intuitive as well as analytic. It comes from sensing how her images and tone shift across forty years of writing, and from watching how her poems have challenged and deepened my spiritual life, my beliefs and doubts. She proposes that "God seems much more friendly through a hearty Lens," and for a decade she's been my lens. Her language has inflected my spiritual landscape, and so, as I read, I reflect those images back onto the page. Our stories have intertwined through these poems, and so they do in these pages.

For certain readers, like myself, knowing what Emily believed is not solely a question of biographical interest, or a historical mystery, attractive for its uncertainty. For me, to know the resolution of Emily's long, tumultuous relationship with God seems to promise some hope or help in my similar struggles. She knew, as I do, that "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul —." If I could solve how (or if) Emily answered the all-important questions that troubled her, maybe it would help me to settle mine. "It comforts an instinct if another have felt it too."

For over ten years, I have turned to her poems as others have to Scripture: for joy, for hope or peace in distress. I've read her poetry the way others go to Bible study, in order to challenge what I know and to know better what challenges me. I've even prayed her poems when I had no words of my own to offer. (That practice started by accident on a turbulent autumn day—but I'll tell that story later.) Most importantly, I have returned again and again to Emily's poems simply to meet anew their fellow feeling and experience their beauty. Thus I've accepted the invitation that Emily extends in a letter to her cousins, "Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray," because I, too, cannot pray and because I love her songs. Like her favorite biblical character, Jacob, Emily wrestled with God and insisted, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Her poems are witness to the struggle. They also show how many blessings she received. I won't let her go until she blesses me.

"Let Emily sing for you"

In what follows, I hope to share the blessing of Emily's songs with you. From nearly eighteen hundred poems, I've chosen twenty-five to explore in detail, some for their fresh take on old spiritual problems, some for their playfulness toward established Christianity: "Our Old Neighbor – God –" can certainly stand a tease. I picked poems that illuminate a key facet of Emily's religious life or that speak to mine. I selected poems with a rare image, depth of insight, a stilling phrase—though in Emily's work, there's no shortage of these. I hope these poems will guide readers beyond the repetitive, limited set printed in anthologies

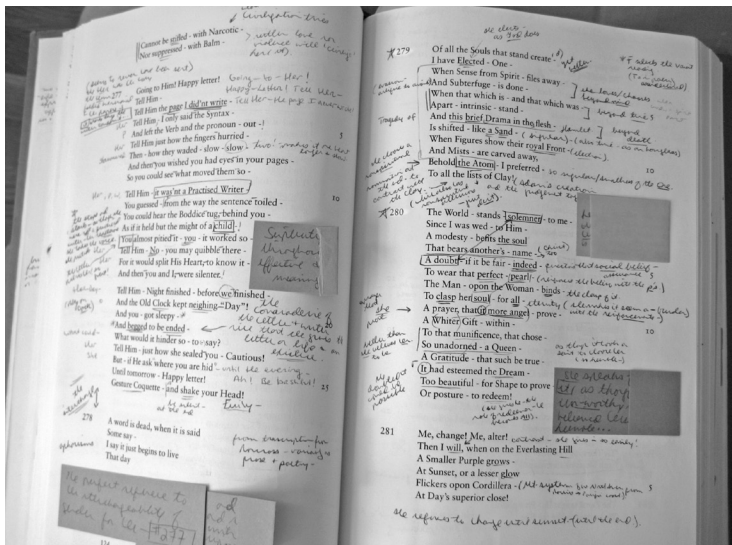
and on bookmarks, beyond the cloying stereotype of the “belle of Amherst” and the myths and misperceptions that obscure Emily’s genius, in and aside from her religious thought.

There are many quite wonderful poems about religion that I have omitted here, in part because they are readily available elsewhere: poems such as “This World is not conclusion” and “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church,” as well as “The Bible is an antique Volume” and “My period had come for Prayer.” These are powerful poems, widely known. “I hesitate which word to take,” Emily sums up my problem perfectly, “as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest.” I chose for “chiefest” the poems you might not otherwise encounter, the ones that open a window onto Emily’s life and thought that might otherwise have remained shut. Here we’ll look at her less familiar work, perhaps in a less familiar way.

This book is made up of meditations, each one rooted in a single poem. The poems are the origin and end of this book, and so my hope is that, when you end this book, you will head back into her writing on your own. I approach the poems as texts for reflection, much as a preacher might pick a verse or two from the Bible, then spin a sermon to untangle it. The meditations weave together theology, history, biography, Emily’s writings, and my own experiences in an attempt to illuminate each poem’s unique wealth. Each meditation aims to offer the occasion to engage deeply with that poem, to read and reread it, to encounter its insight and beauty.

So the chief thing I would ask is this: spend time with the poems. Read them. And read them again. I confess I sometimes skip or skim long quotes when I’m reading in a hurry. But Emily proposed, “A Book is only the Heart’s Portrait – every

Page a Pulse —,” and she guarded her heart, on and off the page. Her poems are challenging, and they take time to yield their meanings. When I teach Emily’s poetry, I notice that students either find it laughably simple or bafflingly obscure. Both responses can be an excuse to shut the book and walk away, since in the first case it’s not worth the time and, in the second, it takes too much time. There are plenty of other poets who offer tidy imagery and ideas, pre-chewed and digested. Emily’s poems are more like a bird in flight. If you want to see how the bird sees, then you’ll have to find a way to join it in the sky. To say the same thing in a different way: while Emily’s poems pulse with amazing life, we have to slow down and hunker close enough to see it, as we would the minute but lively activity in a tidal pool. A page of my own volume of Emily’s poems might suggest just how much slowness the poems require, as well as how much life such slowness can discover:



Her poems are alive and give life. But first, they ask the reader to lend her own lively attention to the enterprise.

This might not be a book to devour in a single sitting, any more than you could comfortably or enjoyably read a volume of Emily's poems cover to cover. Each poem is dense with so much life that it needs space and time to breathe. Have you ever seen an antique stereoscope? A precursor to the movie camera, it would hold a postcard photograph—of Niagara Falls, say, or the 1860 visit of the Japanese ambassadors to Boston—in a stand affixed by a slide to a pair of viewing goggles. Through a trick of curved glass and the adjustable distance of the slide, the two photographic images side by side on the postcard fuse when you look through the lenses, creating a single three-dimensional image. I suppose that, for the Victorians, it was pretty exciting. The Dickinsons owned one. The point of the analogy is that you could only look at a single scene at a time. So you'd visit Niagara Falls for a while, then slip in the next card, adjust the perspective, and be in the jungles of Peru. This is how I hope you'll travel through this book. The reward for your slow progress will be that these twenty-five poems become rich and familiar landscapes, and Emily herself will travel as your companion. Then, should you choose, the vast wilds of her eighteen hundred poems await your further exploration.

Finally, I hope that you might come away from this encounter with Emily and her poetry as I have, with a kindlier, even jauntier view of the God to whom the poems—in reverence and irreverence—point. This is a book about God, but less the God thundered from pulpits, graven in doctrine, or projected onto PowerPoint with rock band accompaniment than the one that Emily perceived and has helped me to glimpse—the God

met in poetry, love, and birdsong. Though Emily insists she “cannot pray,” she has abundant wisdom to share about God and the spiritual life. I hope you’ll try not praying with Emily Dickinson and me.

BELIEF

I could not find my “Yes” —



CONVERSION



I shall keep singing!
Birds will pass me
On their way to Yellower Climes –
Each – with a Robin's expectation –
I – with my Redbreast –
And my Rhymes –

Late – when I take my place in summer –
But – I shall bring a fuller tune –
Vespers – are sweeter than matins – Signor –
Morning – only the seed – of noon –

NEARLY CHRISTMAS, it's cold in the assembly hall of the northeastern girls' boarding school, Mount Holyoke. The name suggests something of the school's tenor: Holy Yoke. At the front of the room stands the woman who holds the yoke. Nothing in her stern, lined appearance reveals that she is aflame with a mission to convert her young charges to God. When the girls first arrived at the school, trunks in tow, Miss Lyon (these names are worthy of a Dickens novel) had interviewed and classed each one according to her standing in the Book of Life. Looking down the rows now, does she register each girl's state? *Christian*: the word rings a halo around a blond head. *Hoper*:

a face glowing fresh with the promise of faith almost lit. And then her gaze stumbles on a knotty patch, a briar: *No-hoper*. The grooves beside her wide frog-mouth deepen. Time to weed that out.

Miss Lyon begins her address on the sacredness of Christmas and the birth of our Lord, the dangerous trend of levity and decking the halls with evergreens, the need for the girls to apply themselves earnestly to the work of salvation. Warming to her point, Miss Lyon launches her demand into the room: all those girls willing to spend Christmas Day in fasting and prayer should stand as a sign of their consent. The room rises, save for a few entrenched *No-hopers* who remain in their seats.

"They thought it queer I didn't rise," Emily later quipped. "I thought a lie would be queerer."

Narrowing her eyes, Miss Lyon increases the stakes. All who wish to be Christians should sit. (Her logic is good: how much easier for the rebels, already seated, to simply remain sitting.) The student body sinks onto the long benches, which sigh with the weight of the girls' collective will, and just as Miss Lyon lets out her held breath, a single redhead—narrow shoulders, nipped waist, bell skirt—rises from amid the seated crowd.

If Emily showed her resistance to becoming Christian so boldly in public (and in retrospective boasting about this event), she agonized in private over the question. In the 1840s and 1850s, her formative years, conversion raged through Amherst, Massachusetts, and the surrounding country, conquering as fully as a flood. A small awakening, seen by historical eyes, it did not feel minor to those in its thrall. Main Street in Amherst might as well have been the road to Damascus, for each day new souls walked abroad blinded by the light of conviction.

The bells seemed to speak more brilliantly, the preachers more heatedly, and women wept and men cried out during daily revival meetings. Even the stones and trees might be said to have yielded up and become Christian, since the very air seemed to preach to the unrepentant their need to convert. "Christ is calling everyone here," Emily confided to her school friend Jane Humphrey, one of the few to whom she spoke about spiritual matters. "In the day time it seems like Sundays, and I wait for the bell to ring, and at evening a great deal stranger, the 'still small voice' grows earnest and rings, and returns, and lingers, and the faces of good men shine, and bright halos come around them; and the eyes of the disobedient look down, and become ashamed." The air was thick with it. Those not taken in the first wave, arriving when Emily was eight, surely ceded under one of nine revivals that flooded Amherst from 1840 to 1862. Later swells claimed her father, sister, brother, and dear friend and sister-in-law, Sue. Her mother was already a convert. One by one, the whole rest of the family turned afresh to God, imbued with conviction, like little islands sinking into the sea. A lone island remained.

"I am standing alone in rebellion," Emily reported in 1850, at nineteen. (This was three years after the scene in which she'd actually *stood* in rebellion before Miss Lyon, as if to literalize the metaphor.) Now another revival was underway. For the previous four years, Emily had watched her neighbors and acquaintances "melt"—her word—in the fires of awakening. She was cautious and had decided to avoid the revival meetings that moved others swiftly to faith. "I felt that I was so easily excited," she explained, "that I might again be deceived and I dared not trust myself." It was not the conversion she dreaded,