THE SINGLE HOUND; POEMS OF A LIFETIME

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EMILY DICKINSON & MARTHA DICKINSON BIANCHI

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POEMS OF A LIFETIME

BY

EMILY DICKINSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HER NIECE
MARTHA DICKINSON BIANCHI

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1915

THE EDITOR'S PREFACE.

THE romantic friendship of my Aunt Emily Dickinson and her "Sister Sue" extended from girlhood until death. The first poem, dated, was sent in 1848, and probably the last word Aunt Emily ever wrote was her reply to a message from my Mother, "My answer is an unmitigated Yes, Sue." During the last year of my Mother's life she read and re-read these poems, and innumerable letters, with increasing indecision as to the final disposition of her treasury. It eventually devolved upon me to choose between burning them or giving them to the lovers of my Aunt's peculiar genius.

My hesitation was finally influenced by a note written in their early twenties, which I quote.

DEAR SUE:

I like your praise because I know it knows. If I could make you and Austin proud some day a long way off, 'twould give me taller feet.

EMILY.

This is my inspiration for a volume, offered as a memorial to the love of these "Dear, dead Women."

Also, it seemed but fitting to reveal a phase of Aunt Emily known only to us who dwelt with her behind the hedge; the fascinating, wilful woman, lightning and fragrance in one.

I am told she is taught in colleges as a rare strange being; a weird recluse, eating her heart out in morbid and unhappy longing, or a victim of unsatisfied passion; I have heard her called "an epigrammatic Walt Whitman" by a noted lecturer, and only recently a distinguished foreign critic pronounced her "the greatest mystic America has produced — second only to Ralph Waldo Emerson."

But to her niece and nephews she was of fairy lineage, akin to the frost on the nursery pane in Winter or the humming bird of Midsummer; the realization of our vivid fancy, the confederate in every contraband desire, the very Spirit of the "Never, Never Land."

She adored us, her three Child-Lovers, talked to us as if we were grown up and our opinions

of importance, our secrets portentous, though always keeping herself our playmate with such art that she remains in my memory as a little girl herself. Once, when my brother Ned, as a child, stood looking up at the evening star, he said wistfully, "I want to go up there, Aunt Emily." "All right," she cried, "Go get your horse and buggy and we'll go tonight!" Often quoting afterward his grave rebuke of her levity — "Aunt Emily, — you can't go up there in a horse and buggy!"

When we were happy she added her crumb, when we were ill all she had was ours, were we grieved, her indignation was hot against whoever or whatever had wounded us. I thought of her as the avenging angel then, her eyes smouldered so gloriously at our wrongs. One other charm was unique to her; her way of flitting, like a shadow upon the hillside, a motion known to no other mortal. In the midst of one of our Eden-hours, she would fly at the sound of an intruder and was not — only the tick of the old clock left for our companioning. I was usually left with her while both families went to church

on Sabbath mornings and well remember being escorted by her down to the cool hoarding cellar, past the wine closet to a mysterious cupboard of her own, where she dealt me such lawless cake and other goodies, that even a child of four knew it for excess, sure to be followed by disaster later in the day. There was an unreal abandon about it all such as thrills the prodigality of dreaming.

As we grew older her wit was our unconscious standard of others, her pitiless directness of thought our revelation, while her sweetness was like nothing but that of her own favorite jasmine flowers. Indeed she resembled the Cape Jasmine more than any mortal being. They two were the whitest Sisters, or flowers, Nature ever bore.

Once let us get to her, —past what Mr. Henry James calls "an archaic Irish servant," past our other faithful but prejudiced Aunt Lavinia, who gave us a plain cookey and advised us to "run home," —once within the forbidden precincts of the "front part" of the old mansion, we had found our South-West passage and were

transported, obstinate, oblivious. To water her plants with her tiny watering pot, to help her ice a loaf of plum cake for her Father's supper, to watch her check off the rich dark caramels she unfailingly kept on hand for us, to share her wickedness in skirmishing to avoid outsiders, or to connive in her intrigue to outwit the cat of perpetual unpopularity in her esteem, — what other joys could drag us from these?

She put more excitement into the event of a dead fly than her neighbors got from a journey by stage-coach to Boston. If art is "*exaggeration apropos*," as Mérimée claims, she was an incomparable artist at life.

There was nothing forbidden us by her, in spite of which license we were as shy of troubling her, as gentle in our play with her, as if she had been Hans Andersen's little Snow Maiden and might melt before our eyes if misunderstood.

Fascination was her element. It was my brother Ned, borne home against his will, screaming "I want a rich! I *will see* my Aunt