

Science Fiction

Standards and Practices

By Barry N. Malzberg



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Originally appeared in "The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction"
in April 1993

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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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EMILY DICKINSON could sense her options winding down. The biological clock in the first place, 37 years old now and no child, no husband, not even a man about whom she could fantasize; then too on all other fronts her life seemed to have become sallow, wasted. The City University was cutting back now, even on the adjunct positions; the building management had made specious “improvements” to her studio and had socked her with a twenty-eight-dollar-a-month increase. Everywhere she turned this sullen October she felt the sense of her imprisonment ever more palpable. Staring down 85th Street at the Hudson, looking at the fireball sun collapse unevenly behind the monstrous buildings of Fort Lee, New Jersey, Emily felt as if she herself were sinking, as if—

*That enormous ball; unbuckled to its waist
Charmless, the suitor beckoning to his celestial hutch
As if not embrace but the stone grave without haste
Awaited those kissing—beckoning—unguent clutch.*

And the poetry was not going well either; ever since Howard Moss had died the *New Yorker* had been closed to her. *Epoch*, the *Massachusetts Review* not even postage money and after the little flurry surrounding her first book, a close runner-up for the Lamont Moss had told her, and a one-thousand-dollar grant from the Academy of Arts & Letters, she had been unable to attract any interest in what she felt was her far stronger second collection, now going the contest circuit after five years of failing to find even Capra or Swallow Press. Of course the poetry had never been anything which she could have taken seriously, it had been as her brother Austin had told her so many years ago “a very nice outlet” and that was about all but it was frustrating to find even this closed off to her now. But the men situation was worse; after the little thing she had

had going with Oliver hit or miss for a couple of years, at least he had been predictable and she could count on him to do nothing crazy, after that had come to a quick truncation with Oliver's on-line management shifting half the company, bang! Like that to Santa Fe, she had had no man in her life at all. Not that she could gird herself to the seeking. Where were they? They were all married or gay or crazy or some combination of the three and then too there was the lurking possibility of AIDS with anyone at any time, that—

*Small bite, the grand and sweeping unbuttoning
In rorridoys far and dense, the swoon of gluttony
Unappeased by that darker fear; grave to grave
We travel and only that dreaming bite become our nave.*

You perhaps reached that point, close to 40 or a little beyond, where all of your plans and scuttling for possibility seem only to have led to this West Side of replication and loss, the dropping of the sun into the river prefiguring the fall of her own life. And yet Emily

was not able to accept this, had not come from Amherst to Mount Holyoke to work-study to her marginal academic career in New York to give it all up at the age of 38. There were possibilities, she had not utterly lost her looks, was this not the age of millennial possibility? Girded by thoughts like this to say nothing of her own determination, Emily Dickinson resolved to find some recovered possibility in her life, to unleash—

*As it in concourse meadow—the touch of the stones
Thunderous in that creating storm—oh with hand
Unbent in the nave, hearing His groans
Thunderous in the surprising concourse of his hand.*

Remembering her unsatisfactory experience in EST, the truly unsettling men she had met and the Saturdays spent in hard chairs listening to the shouting, fighting for control of her bladder, Emily elected to stay away from self-improvement yet could not resist taking a free interview with the Church of Latent Possibility situated

at Times Square. Crisp in the denims of the Ocean Going Latitudes, the senior group of the Church, her interviewer efficiently took her biography, nodded sympathetically when Emily confided her unsatisfactory experiences with psychiatry, her sense of betrayal when Oliver had raised himself from the bed after their penultimate coupling to tell her that he was leaving town. "They always wait until after sex," Emily said bitterly, "if they have something awful to tell you. No matter who they are, that's how they handle it."

"Isn't that the truth?" the Ocean Going lieutenant said. Well groomed in her immaculate uniform, she reminded Emily of her mother back in Amherst, warning her that all men were swine, but only in the most sympathetic tones. "Will you want a full reconditioning?" the lieutenant said. "I think that would be best to turn your life around. It would be twenty sessions in ten weeks and then we'll reevaluate." When Emily said nothing, the lieutenant cleared her throat and said, that would be one thousand dollars for the initial consultation and assignment. Of course we can work out terms."

Ancient Puritan warnings seemed to circulate in the abcess of memory within Emily's consciousness, along with the severe cast of her mother's features when she felt that Emily and Austin were, as her expression went, *going off* with her. "I don't think I can afford anything like that," Emily Dickinson said. "I was more or less just looking for some advice, maybe some kind of genial mixer, college graduates, young singles, like that—"

"Well," the lieutenant said and paused. "Well, of course, there are functions such as that. But that must come later. After you're reestablished, after we've had a chance—"

"I'm sorry," Emily said. She pushed the hard chair away, retreated toward the door, trying to appear casual but noticing that the lieutenant's features had shifted to a kind of dread and focused attentiveness. "I guess this wasn't for me after all. One thousand dollars for reconditioning I mean, I don't want to be *reconditioned*, I'd just like a date or maybe a chance at a tenure track somewhere in the city, that's all I'm afraid you take my ambitions as being too large. I'm 38 years old, it's really too late to be *reconditioned*."

Feeling dignity flee along with any intimidations of a more positive self-image, Emily stumbled through the door and into Times Square thinking: I have taken my life too seriously, it is time to establish some distance, some space between—

*The angels and the dust that surely comes for me
Or the darkness and the cast light of lost possibility.*

Emily attends the short-story reading at Symphony Space Theater on Broadway at 95th Street. In a packed theater of white West Siders and upwardly mobile singles or nearly attached she listens to stories of Flannery O'Connor, Woody Allen and Russell Bates as read by several actors, the only one she likes being Mary Sternhagen. The O'Connor strikes her as being needlessly morbid but when the old woman is shot dead the audience breaks into applause and Emily remembers that in modern criticism this act is conceived as being not murderous but sacramental. Repulsive as this may be, she has herself taught that interpretation at Hunter College

not so many years ago. Now however she finds it difficult to take such bland assurances into an October night populated by her chattering, contented contemporaries and homeless people who sit on crates and mumble about money or the sonsofbitches. Emily finds herself approached and escorted by the man who had sat at her left during the reading, a short man with assassin's features who had kicked her once by accident and then when he had apologized had given her a longing but ambiguous look. Now he says that he is a clinical psychologist who does adjunct work at Einstein and consultations at Cornell as well as sustaining a small practice and he could see that she hated the O'Connor story as much as he did. He suggests that since they both seem to be unescorted they go to the Library Restaurant and have some dinner.

Emily knows that he is married and probably has at least two children and does not get along badly enough with his wife to make him even the vaguest of prospects. At 38 and in this city, granted her experience and that of her friends, she has all the intelligence and acuity she needs not to be murdered as a result of her own

stupidity, but pushing him away now seems to require more energy than simply submitting. She is lonely and perhaps the oceangoers are right; she is in need of a thorough reconditioning. His name is Robert and he was struck right away by the sensitivity and intensity of her features, he would bet that she is creative in some ways, maybe even a writer. Is this true? By this time they are already seated in the restaurant. Emily talks about the City University but does not mention the poetry, that being the most private part of herself and in any event she is barely writing now. They talk amiably enough through and after dinner and now it is time to decide what to do. Not so many years ago, Emily thinks she might have had a somewhat wider series of choices or possibilities but this, of course, is the AIDS era and one does nothing on a first or even a fifteenth encounter until one has thoroughly researched the situation. She asks for Robert's phone number.

"Why don't you give me yours?" he says.

She does so. There is little enough at risk and she has a police lock, a doorman and an answering machine. "Now will you give me your number?" she says.

"It's easier for me to call you," Robert says. "I'm out a lot and having trouble on the line. You can reach me at Einstein on Tuesday afternoons late, usually and at Cornell on Saturday mornings."

Now she knows he is married. The near-disclosure is neither thunderous nor amusing, it is simply part of the landscape like the faded seats in the theater and the imploded sun collapsing into the foul Hudson. "Well," she says, "well, it's been nice talking with you. I have to teach an early class, though, so we'd best go." She puts a twenty-dollar bill on the table. that should be fair," she says. "Take care of the check. Maybe I'll see you at the next reading. Maybe not." He looks at her silently, his face slightly abashed, a small boy perhaps caught fondling himself in the back of the classroom, under his desk. She walks out of the classroom as she had walked from the church a few days ago, her stride even, her legs curiously shaky, however. She has been walking out of too many places this way

recently and for no apparent purpose. There is some air of finality in these places which she would like to think of as millennial but which she suspects has to do with her own age and condition.

* * * *

Emily finds herself at a sports bar on upper Broadway, surrounded by singles, staring without much interest at a New York Rangers playoff game on five television sets suspended above the bar. Increasingly in these last weeks she has found herself in situations like these, after a long period when she had felt that all of this nonsense was behind her. It must have something to do with the season but then again Oliver's departure and failure to write may have had a greater effect upon her than she could have ever expected. The Rangers score a goal and lead 5-3 but St. Louis gets two late surprise goals to tie and then wins in the third minute of

overtime, creating a mood in the sports bar which comes as close to ugly as affluent, cynical West Siders can be in the presence of an impersonal disaster. In all of this time, too, no one has spoken to her; she has sat at the bar invisibly and invisibly now she puts money on the bar. Has the long-feared collapse of all association come to her? Has she lost her looks, her soul or any sense of possibility? She does not know but preparing to leave the bar, Emily has a wild feeling of dislocation, it settles upon her like a cloak and she can feel the uneasy and uneven shifting within her heart.

"Excuse me," a man says, brushing past her, waving at his date who seems to glow with necessity, her face suffused with love as she waves back. Emily has always feared her acuity, felt it as a curse but she has never known it to give her the kind of pain which she now feels. She is not a bad-looking woman, is she? Howard Moss had been enamored of her poetry and had actually taken three of her

minor poems, then had maneuvered the Viking acceptance of the collection. All of that had been ten years ago, of course. Things change in ten years. In fact, things can become terminal in much less time than this, Emily thinks.

She leaves the bar, cries of revulsion toward the Rangers sounding behind her. She has the odd and irrational thought that perhaps she should call Robert after all, find him at Einstein on Tuesday and say, "All right, I'm not going anywhere either. Who are we kidding? You get a test and I'll have a test and if that works out we can have a wracking pointless affair." She thinks of this, the thought of it almost palpable as she strides down Broadway, not looking at the beggars, not looking at the homeless clumped like bushes to the sidewalk, thinking that there are certain degrees of insight which are perhaps insupportable. Perhaps this explains why she has more or less ceased to write Poetry and has sought advice in places like the

Church of Latent Possibility, companionship from men like Robert, communion in spaces like the sports bar. She has become a version of herself she could not have imagined when she was that young woman at Holyoke twenty years ago, a feeling then as if—

His Features—Tumultuous in the Night

Came and embraced—made my frail gasps Wind—

And in the harshness of the sudden Wind his light

Touch and tumble were not then to Find—

And then again it may simply be, as her friends in Massachusetts had warned her when she came to take the adjunct post so many years ago, that life in New York would simply be insupportable.

* * * *

At an end-of-semester party for the English Department staff and their significant others, Emily—who has invited and come with Robert but cannot now see him at the other side of the lounge, so packed is the room—is arguing, quite pointlessly, with a bearded lawyer, the husband of medievalist, who says that he was never able to bear the work of William Wordsworth. “Or any of those mystic types,” he says. “Blake or Donne. Or Edna St. Vincent Millay. There was a woman I could never stand. She was full of fairy tales and cheap gimmicks.”

“I’m not sure,” Emily says. She impulsively reaches out a soothing hand, strokes his elbow. There is nothing erotic in her touch and with his wife three feet away, no sense of possibility and they both know it. The gesture means nothing and is therefore safe. “I think that *Aria da Capo* is really quite charming,” Emily says. “She has a

lot to say about the fragility of fantasy, the extinguishment of hope, I think.

"Well," the lawyer says, "that may be what *you* think." He stares at the place on his jacket Emily had touched as if it were somehow engraved with meaning. "But I don't see it that way. I don't think that Edna St. Vincent Millay has anything to do with the West Side of Manhattan in 1992."

"Oh, I don't know," Emily Dickinson says. She suppresses a wild, a demonic urge to seize the lawyer's private parts and inflict knowledge upon them. "I mean, we can't be sure, can we?" She smiles at him and in the dense spaces of the room feels her heart, thundering and enormous, sway like a fruit in that interior orchard, the wind of knowledge coursing through her.

"I think she might be *very* relevant," Emily Dickinson says and thinks of Robert's helpless touch. "If you look for her, really look for her hard," she says.

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