

Emily and Montri

When Montri Umavijani first arrived in Amherst in September 1997, there was no mistaking him for Emily Dickinson. After all, Emily was a fairly eccentric woman whose poetry and lifestyle are still shrouded in mystery a century after her death. In her day, few understood or appreciated her poetry, but now she is considered by many to be not only the greatest nineteenth century poet in the U.S.A., but possibly the finest poet the country has yet produced. Rumor has it that she never left her house in the last fifteen years of her life, and that she always wore white dresses. Montri Umavijani, for his part, is unmistakably a Thai male poet of the late twentieth century. How could two more disparate people, places, and times possibly converge?

After Montri's first visit to the Dickinson homestead, he seemed utterly refreshed. A man of extraordinary empathy and sensitivity, his own books are a rare testament to encounters with poets and even gods of distant lands and cultures. Montri just happens to be alive in a certain time and place, but for him history (and herstory), the past, present, and future, all comeingle, and humans are transparent, vibrating spirits with millions of antennae unconsciously connected to everything, near and far, old and new, a swirling universe of codependent origination.

When Montri one day seemed a bit under the weather, I suggested that he pay Emily a visit. He retorted in no uncertain terms that he was unable and unwilling to see her until he regained his health and inner composure. I then realized how silly my advice had been, for Montri would never go to Emily to take, only to give selflessly of himself. After some time passed, he visited again. That day he had the good fortune of being photographed inside and

outside the house by Frank Ward, Amherst's most distinguished contemporary photographer (well known for his work on Tibet, Bosnia, and Americana). Frank happened to be on assignment at the homestead to shoot Emily's tiny white dress, a fetishistic object owned by the local historical society.

As the days turned into weeks, Montri seemed to be drawn deeper and deeper into Emily's web. When he took a short excursion to South Carolina to visit his old, dying friend, Charles Anderson, the highly respected scholar who had penned a volume on Emily, it seemed that she was traveling with him. Returning to Amherst, Montri found Anderson's book on Emily at the antique store across the street from the homestead, and he bought it immediately.

When it came time to depart from Amherst, Montri asked me to drive by the graveyard so he could say one last goodbye to Emily. I complied and waited in the car. Tourists often leave coins on her grave as a sign of respect and affection, so I asked Montri if he, too, had left a coin or two. "No," he replied, "I went to bury my used ink cartridges." Only then did I discover that he had been translating a selection of Emily's poems into Thai.

Emily still hovers over the town of Amherst. Montri has since returned to the traffic jams of Bangkok. When I close my eyes, I picture Emily animated in conversation with Montri quietly listening. I see Emily, Montri, the white dress, and poems in English and Thai scattered across her room. Montri invites Emily to step outside for a walk, her first in over a century. Suddenly, everything becomes hazy. I see Emily speaking Thai and Montri wearing the white dress. Who can claim that reincarnation doesn't work in mysterious ways?

John Solt

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