

Poetry Porch: Prose

Henry and Emily

By Joyce Peseroff

Fan Fiction in Eleven Parts

One

Henry hated trains. The noise, the smoke, the way vibrations wrinkled the pond and provoked jays to jump and frogs to fly. Yet here he was, on his way to Amherst, with a letter of introduction to one of Waldo's many groupies. Waldo had tickled Susan with his arch tongue and bushy black brows. Things had gone south with Susan's marriage, and Waldo was keen to take advantage. But Waldo was also keen to end Henry's friendship with Lidian—Lydia, as Henry knew her, snorting to think of Waldo's embellishment of his wife's perfectly serviceable name. Waldo had other bagels to butter—wasn't Maggie Fuller tornadoing her way through Concord, and that Jewish girl from New York—was Emma Lazarus on the schedule too?

The motion of the carriage lulled Henry to sleep. He dreamed he'd pressed his nose against Walden's ice, watching fish blow bubbles. The bubbles beaded under the pond's frozen surface, refracting rainbows, and the vision made him sneeze. He woke to the conductor shaking his shoulder.

Susan's husband presided over the local college and Waldo had pressed Henry to ask him for a job. Henry's books weren't selling. Waldo was easing him into giving up the shack he'd built on Emerson's land for \$48.23 ever since Henry set the woods on fire. Guilty over his dalliance with the astronomy professor's wife, Austin would listen to Susan's petition. "She's one of the few who's read your book and still wants to meet you. She also wants to introduce her sister-in-law, Emily." A spinster, Waldo explained, too shy to meet a celeb like him, might cotton to Henry. "She writes too," Waldo grinned.

Two

“Tea?”

“I prefer water.”

“Oh Carlo!” Emily pushed the Newfie down. “I need to walk the dog.”

“I could use a walk myself.”

“I never leave my father’s grounds.”

“I’ll bring this in case we meet a narrow fellow in the grass.”

Emily blushed as Henry tipped his hat with his walking stick.

Three

Austin glanced at his desk, then everywhere about his office except at Henry, resenting the need to do Susan a favor. “I see you barely made it into Harvard.”

“I was the best ice skater in Cambridge.”

“Your true name, I believe, is David Henry?”

“I do not like alphabetical order.”

Austin shuffled papers while Henry shuffled his feet, exposing a hole in his shoe. “I can give you a position cleaning the observatory, and a small burrow on the east side of the astronomy professor’s house.”

“A dwelling should face east.” Henry understood that Austin had built the professor’s colonial, something Emily whispered in his ear after their frolic with Carlo and the stick.

“Indeed.” Austin stood, and the interview was over.

Four

The burrow’s entrance was almost too narrow for Henry’s shoulders, but he managed to slide down to the packed-dirt floor. Woodchuck, he decided, after exploring the two chambers and escape hole he’d repurpose as a chimney for his hearth after sweeping out the scat. A few hairy tree roots dangled from the ceiling. One looked sturdy enough to hold a lantern.

He missed his cabin, his pond, and his beans. But Emily! She promised to visit no matter what his living arrangements. Austin had drilled a tunnel from the Homestead to the astronomy professor’s house, and the exit was near Henry’s burrow. Emily could preserve her rep as a housebound eccentric, and Henry could burnish his as a hermit. None would know how they moored in each other. Their nights might not be luxurious, but they would be wild.

Five

The Amherst observatory looked like twin cornices half-buried in the ground. The two domes, supported by red brick, housed a telescope and a bathysphere. Henry loved cleaning the telescope's fly-specked mirrors. He dipped rags in vinegar, doing Tai Chi poses with one in each hand. "Vinegar on, flies off," he chanted as he described circles with the rags. Winks of starlight bounced between mirrors until he unhinged the back of the telescope to let them out. Five lively protons whizzed past his ear.

On to the second globe, the bathysphere of pure darkness. Astronomers approaching the telescope would first immerse themselves in the BPD, inviting a lightless universe into their pores. Their sight became keener, more attuned to the pinprick a moon or an asteroid dinged in the blackness like a pebble scraping a buggy fender.

Henry, too, liked starting his work in the dark. But when he slid the door closed, Henry heard what he should not. Heavy breathing, and squeaks that devolved to moans. Was someone killing mice, pests Henry gently removed from the brickwork but had never found in the BPD?

"Who's there? Have you found a mouse?"

Silence, then rustling. Henry tripped and fell to his knees.

"D__n, my toe!" A man's voice. Then a shushing noise.

Fabric tickled Henry's cheek. A slice of light as the door opened, a tumble of brown hair.

Six

"I'll tell you how the sun rose," Emily began. She'd wiggled into Henry's burrow with two torn envelopes clasped under her left armpit.

"Let me read it before I hear it." Henry held his copy under the lantern. After a minute he motioned for her to continue.

He listened, then said, "I like the striptease and those dizzy steeples in the first stanzas. But I'm not sure about the squirrels."

Emily was about to say, "You don't like squirrels?" when she remembered the rules and pursed her lips.

Henry's eyes softened. "Did you write this about us? Because the burrow faces east, you know, I never see the sunset."

"By *I*, I mean some supposed person."

“Let’s go to the final stanza. Those lines suggest the mass incarceration of children, and I don’t know if you want that. Are you alluding to that awful time at Mt. Holyoke?”

Silence.

“Then—ah—the speaker says, ‘I know not’ but tells all about a custodial schoolmaster/priest. An unreliable narrator?” Henry touched Emily’s hand.

“Susan liked the squirrels,” Emily mused, stroking Henry’s fingertips. “She’s always been my first reader.”

This reminded Henry of his encounter in the bathysphere. “Could Austin be using Pure Darkness for...?” He hesitated to utter the word.

Emily smiled wryly. “They lock the parlor door at the Homestead. Or trot off in Austin’s buggy. You likely heard Mabel’s husband with his latest.” She rose to go; the breach between Austin and Susan pained her, and thoughts of the reckless astronomy professor and his wife made her fists clench. “You may escort me to the tunnel.”

Henry handed back the envelopes. Had he scotched their romance with criticism of her latest work, or had Amherst’s sordid dalliances soured her?

“Will we read again?” Henry asked.

“Present no more.” Emily’s foxy red hair vanished into the tunnel—a darkness as pure as the bathysphere’s.

Seven

My dear Waldo,

Life in Amherst has been perplexing in the extreme. I have fallen into a) a burrow, b) family secrets known to all but treated still as secrets, and c) a magnetic relationship with Emily—some days I attract and on others, I repel. I long for my hut on Walden’s shore—living by water is so much nicer than dwelling underground, even when Emily and I are “rowing in Eden.” I would settle her in Concord, but she claims she cannot leave her “best close reader.” I have practiced my skills, but Emily will take her work to Susan.

How are Lydia and the tots? I miss them almost as much as the pond—and you, my friend. Ask Lydia to please put up some rhubarb jam for me. I would give a jar to Emily for her bread, either as a love charm or farewell gift.

Yours in Transcendentalism,

Henry

Eight

Dear Henry,

I am sorry to hear of your distress, as I am the cause of your emigration. I must tell you that I have decided to deed the Walden property to the town of Concord for recreational use. I believe there will be a bathing beach, and access for fisherfolk. Taxes, my friend, are astronomical (forgive me if the word offends—I have heard gossip about your blind encounter with the professor). Selling pencils is an honorable trade, and should you return I would buy many—I am writing essays at an amazing clip, and grind up several daily.

A parcel from Lidian is forthcoming.

I must fly—Miss Fuller is at the gate, and we have much to discuss.

Always your friend,

Waldo

Nine

Henry—here is the jam. I hope Emily finds it agreeable. I am glad you have found a congenial companion. As for me, the children are my lodestars. They ask when Uncle Henry will return, and I cannot answer. Shhh—don't tell—but they prefer your company to their father's. They barely see him between visits from Miss This and Miss That. Maggie Fuller snores away in the guest room, asking for breakfast after I've fed everyone else. Henry, you are the only friend who calls me by my name. Please come back with Emily if you can—Lydia

Ten

Emily was wary of stumbling into her brother while using the tunnel, so Henry walked to the Homestead with his offering. Tired of secrets, he knocked boldly at the front door and once in the parlor, offered Emily the jar.

“I understand about squirrels. They chatter, they scatter, they're everywhere, like daylight. If I had news, I would require squirrels to spread it.”

“I wish *The Atlantic* agreed. Mr. Cramer thought my work worthy of consideration, but when he passed it on, Mr. Higginson called my gait spasmodic.”

“You received a letter from the editor? I would send again.”

“Sometimes I believe publication is as foreign to me as firmament to fin.”

“You, my dear, are a flying fish!” Henry bent his knee. “Fly east with me to Concord!”

“Henry, I am very fond of you. I would be done with the compass, done with the chart! And a jar of rhubarb jam makes a pretty engagement ring. But I cannot leave the Homestead.” Emily dropped her chin.

“My family owns a pencil factory. You will never lack for writing implements.”

“I can’t leave Susan!” Emily cried. Her look of agony Henry did not like, because it was true. Insinuations from Austin and the astronomy professor— Henry believed them now. Susan was more than Emily’s first reader.

Eleven

Henry’s feet were wet, as he’d slipped on a stone while crossing Mill Brook. But Waldo’s study faced the turnpike, and Henry needed to see Lydia alone. He tapped at the back door. When it opened, he pressed a finger to his lips.

“Uncle Henry!”

“Eddie, can you be silent as the moon and take this to your mother for me?”

Eddie grabbed the clean jam jar and, when Henry nodded, removed the pieces of ginger candy within.

Lydia’s smile was eager and warm as she asked Henry to come inside. “But where is Emily?”

“Emily preferred the gift to the giver. I am afraid my sojourn was fruitless.”

“But surely you will get a poem out of it, if not an essay?”

“I remain silent as the moon.”

“Henry! Is that you?” Waldo’s voice boomed down the corridor. “Lidian, bring him to my study. Margaret Fuller and Emma Lazarus are here, and would enjoy your thoughts on the manner in which women are portrayed in statuary.”

Henry hesitated. He looked wistfully at Lydia. Lydia shook her head, and gestured toward Waldo. “Come see the children after.”

But Henry retreated. “I am sorry, but I must prepare for a week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. My canoe needs patching, and my stores collecting.” Whether he would return, or pitch himself into one of the rivers, he did not know.

Lydia read Henry’s expression and, ignoring her husband, took her friend’s arm. “We’ll walk.”

For close to five minutes, they were silent. Lydia said, “I wish I could paddle my own canoe.”

“I would give you the bow seat.”

“I cannot steer from there.”

“And where would you portage?”

“By your shore.”

“Oh Lydia! You wish what no one else wants. Not Emily, not dear Miss Sewall. Even Waldo would prefer me out of his woods.” They approached Mill Brook.

“If not for the children, I’d go.”

“I know you cannot.”

“Promise me you won’t travel the river alone!”

Henry touched her furrowed brow. A solo trip had been his intention. But Lydia was wise to his state of mind.

“I suppose I could ask John.” In the narrow confines of a canoe, Henry could work on the hurt John endured when, after his rejection by Miss Sewall, his younger brother courted his crush. Physical labor, bean porridge, and uncertain waters would strengthen their bond, or so he would propose. If things went well, they would both return. If not—just one. Or none.

Lydia turned homeward, happy with Henry’s decision. The Concord River was no longer at flood stage—the season for putting up rhubarb was over. It was time for raspberries, then blueberries, then blackberries. She would boil jam, sweet for Henry on his return.