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Emily Dickinson

Selected Poems



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Emily Dickinson



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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
I. LIFE	9
II. LOVE	47
III. NATURE	75
IV. TIME AND ETERNITY	125
V. THE SINGLE HOUND	173
Index of First Lines	245

INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson, one of America's greatest poets, was publicly unknown until after her death. Her life was relatively uneventful. She never married and remained home to take care of her aging parents. After they died she retired from the world and lived as a virtual recluse. She avoided strangers, always wore white, rarely left the confines of her property, and during her last years communicated—even with friends—through cryptic letters and notes. When Dickinson died at the age of fifty-six on May 15, 1886, she was known among her Amherst, Massachusetts neighbors not for her verse but for her eccentricities.

Although Emily Dickinson included poems to her friends in her correspondence, they never realized the extent of her talent. After her death, her sister Lavinia was amazed to find in a box hundreds of Emily's poems organized into packets of four, five, or six sheets of folded stationery. Lavinia decided to try to get the poems published and convinced Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an Amherst College professor, to help her. Todd transcribed the poems and enlisted Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an essayist and man of letters with whom Dickinson had a ongoing correspondence, to edit them with her.

Higginson had received his first letter from Emily Dickinson on April 15, 1862, shortly after he published an article on how novice writers should seek publication. She enclosed several of her poems and asked him whether they "breathed."

Higginson was baffled and perplexed by Dickinson's startling originality. Her poems did not conform to the nineteenth-century notion of poetry—verse that adhered to regular meter and rhyme. At first, Higginson even

doubted that what she wrote was poetry, "What place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism." He finally concluded that her work was "poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise conveyed." He recommended that she delay publication. She accepted his advice and never again sought to publish. But despite this rejection she continued to compose poems in her unique fashion.

Dickinson had few apparent influences. The Bible, Shakespeare, and church hymnals formed the core of her reading and other than Higginson's comments she received no professional criticism. In her artistic solitude she relied solely on her own vision and creativity, and her work displays groundbreaking adventurousness and innovation in meter, imagery, and form. And, unlike other poets of her time who dwelled largely upon society and the outside world, Emily Dickinson's poetry inhabited the interior world of her psyche and explored her own fears and desires with a startling scrutiny. Her work anticipated the twentieth century and her influence on modern poetry has been profound.

Today Emily Dickinson's poetry is enormously popular and continues to captivate readers with its unique wit, imagination, and style.

This collection includes selections from the three volumes that Higginson and Todd edited between 1890 and 1896 and follows their division of the poems into the sections "Life," "Love," "Nature," and "Time and Eternity." *The Single Hound*, a subsequent collection published in 1914 and edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Emily Dickinson's niece, is included in its entirety.

CHRISTOPHER MOORE

New York
1993

I Life



*This is my letter to the world,
That never wrote to me,—
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty.*

*Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!*

• I •

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag today
Can tell the definition,
So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear.

• I I •

Soul, wilt thou toss again?
By just such a hazard
Hundreds have lost, indeed,
But tens have won an all.

Angels' breathless ballot
Lingers to record thee;
Imps in eager caucus
Raffle for my soul.

• I I I •

Our lives are Swiss,—
 So still, so cool,
 Till, some odd afternoon,
The Alps neglect their curtains,
And we look farther on.

Italy stands the other side,
 While, like a guard between,
The solemn Alps,
The siren Alps,
 Forever intervene!

• I V •

Within my reach!
I could have touched!
I might have chanced that way!
Soft sauntered through the village,
Sauntered as soft away!
So unsuspected violets
Within the fields lie low,
Too late for striving fingers
That passed, an hour ago.

• V •

I never hear the word “escape”
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation,
A flying attitude.

I never hear of prisons broad
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars,—
Only to fail again!

• V I •

'Twas such a little, little boat
That toddled down the bay!
'Twas such a gallant, gallant sea
That beckoned it away!

'Twas such a greedy, greedy wave
That licked it from the coast;
Nor ever guessed the stately sails
My little craft was lost!

• V I I •

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour
Sharp pittances of years,
Bitter contested farthings
And coffers heaped with tears.

• V I I I •

Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit,—Life!

• I X •

A modest lot, a fame *petite*,
A brief campaign of sting and sweet
Is plenty! Is enough!
A sailor's business is the shore,
A soldier's—balls. Who asketh more
Must seek the neighboring life!

• X •

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun!

• X I •

Faith is a fine invention
For gentlemen who see;
But microscopes are prudent
In an emergency!

• X I I •

A wounded deer leaps highest,
I've heard the hunter tell;
'Tis but the ecstasy of death,
And then the brake is still.

The smitten rock that gushes,
The trampled steel that springs:
A cheek is always redder
Just where the hectic stings!

Mirth is the mail of anguish,
In which it caution arm,
Lest anybody spy the blood
And "You're hurt" exclaim!

• X I I I •

Portraits are to daily faces
As an evening west
To a fine, pedantic sunshine
In a satin vest.