



When a Lonely Heart is Just a Queer One

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Dear Sue—

**Unable are the
Loved—to die—
For Love is immortality—
Nay—it is Deity—**

Emily.

My kinship to Emily Dickinson extended only to her poetry and her as a poet. I never felt kinship with Emily Dickinson herself; I was told to feel pity. Told: here is a woman no one understood, a woman who didn't want people to understand her, who shut herself off from the world, never loved or was loved and only ever pined for death. A gothic and romanticized fantasy in place of any person Emily could ever be allowed to be. When I thought of Emily, I thought of a lonely recluse, a forlorn, self-imposed shut-in who passioned deeply, yet waited for death rather than live. The world was too much. The world refused to contain all the parts of her it didn't approve of. She shut herself in to keep herself. When she died, they took her anyway.

**This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—¹**

I live in Egypt, a vast geographical distance from where Emily lived and died. In a British highschool and British university, I was taught by others about her surrounding history, poetry, culture, and words. Later, I would learn about her on my own from a virtual web of information that is limited, still, despite its ability to connect and share knowledge because I hadn't been given whole parts of her story. I will probably never see or place in my hands anything of hers that was physical: her poems, her remaining letters and papers. Anything actually Emily. I will only ever have things that have been shaped and rewritten by others, regurgitated back to me through them first.

**To own a Susan of my own
Is of itself a Bliss—
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
Continue me in this!²**

1 [Maria Popova](#) ".Figuring ".published February2019

2 [Maria Popova](#) ".Figuring ".published February2019

Through *Wild Nights with Emily* – a play-turned-movie by Madeleine Olnek – and the slew of articles it spawned, I discovered everything I was told about Emily was wrong. Emily had a long-standing and well-documented (yet subsequently erased) love affair with her childhood friend and future sister-in-law Susan Gilbert. Olnek, herself a lesbian woman, tears through the heteronormative framework that had trapped Emily for so long and redacted Susan entirely. The movie shows an Emily entirely human and relatable and queer. She was never anyone’s tragic romantic fantasy except those who decided to make her so to make her more palatable. Her relationship with Susan was never hidden, just ignored.

***Her breast is fit for pearls,
But I was not a “Diver”—
Her brow is fit for thrones
But I have not a crest,
Her heart is fit for home—
I – a Sparrow – build there
Sweet of twigs and twine
My perennial nest.***³

All her longing and energy and love, despite what I’d been taught, was not wholly directed in a heterosexual way. Her play with gender, her play with structure, her influence on modernists and what would become stream-of-consciousness style, were all things I felt kinship with in her writing, yet I felt distanced from her real-life *life*. I feel betrayed and misled by academics and the literary world (ruled by white people) who *chose* to paint her as a loveless recluse who never married and therefore never loved, never lived her full potential as ‘woman’ in a heteronormative world. But like Sappho, Emily’s poems were never geared towards just one sex, she always wrote to whoever she loved and longed for. a lot of the time, it was to Susan she wrote.

***To miss you, Sue,
is power.***⁴

Emily’s poetry was heavily edited after her death, and her love letters to women changed

3 <https://americanqueer.org/poetry/>

4 <https://americanqueer.org/poetry/>

to address men instead or erased entirely. The majority of her poems were published after her death because no one would publish her when she was living, her writing not quite fitting the style of the times nor bending to the fancies of the men who decided what was and wasn't worth publishing. Far too often across history has this happened to great women artists. How many have been made to live the lives others expect of them, their art and true lives never acknowledged fully? Their words taken, or erased, or changed to fit societal molds and expectations, only to then be profited off of by others?

Mabel Loomis Todd – her first editor to collate and publish Emily's poems
Erased as much of Susan as she possibly could
A Susan who was wife to Austin Dickinson
Austin who was lover to Mabel, and Mabel who so loved
The recluse of Emily who refused to ever see Mabel—

The Emily who loved Susan.

*Wild nights
And buried history
Of women – loving women
And not tearing each other –
Up – everything tidy –
Covered up.*

*Someone who has a lover –
A woman lover and loves her –
Can never be hidden forever
Or made to be 'in love' with any man
She just happened to write letters to.*

***I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –⁵***

Emily was queer, in every historical sense of the word. The mythology around her was that she was misunderstood – and that was entirely by design, but it wasn't Emily's. She wanted to be known and understood, she wanted her words published and read. As Emily's posthumous and self-appointed first editor and publisher Mabel Loomis Todd made Emily publishable by removing every trace of her queerness, thereby making her an unknown, a mystery in the process.

5 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52197/i-dwell-in-possibility466->

The dead have nothing to fear. Neither did the living Emily. She sent out her words and yearned like every writer to be published. No one wanted her 'queer' words, her new style that didn't rhyme, and her gendered name.

*Where is respect for the dead?
Why now – over a hundred and thirty
Some years since she existed –
And wrote words – Why
Does it come to light – to consciousness
To queer poetics
Being allowed – to be queer poetics?*

*Til the almost 21st century
Before a woman saw another woman, fully
And told us she loved – a woman?*

I guess – we all know why.

*To the women who erased, the women who ignored
And to the women who love women
And let Emily love them – too –
In front of the whole world.*

None – will ever know her.

*Who better to make a myth – indeed
Then a silenced and unvoiced woman poet?
To create from her words the narrative of a woman
Love scorned – lusting for love, never fulfilling it?
Whose words – cut up – put back together –
Were made to support this?*

***Success is counted sweetest
By those who never succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.***⁶

*Historians knew. It is something
– Apparently – hard to miss
Unless you're really not looking for it –*

*Unless you cannot imagine anything outside
What you want of Emily – her life to be
Like her family – like her obsessive documentarians
And those who would fall in straight love –
With a dead girl who wrote words of longing for love –*

*But always had it. Just not the way
her or Sue –
could have ever been – together.*

***Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —⁷***

*Death, the myth – and immortality.
How would she want to be remembered?
No one anticipates erasure, but it is a fact
A given of death. Posthumous infamy
Is phenomenon unaccounted for, nor
Does its shape ever look the same.*

***Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.***⁸

A lack-of-love, though love in many forms was there, became her pseudonym, her calling card. The queen of lonely hearts turned black from lack of love. She would become the goddess of unrequited love, of being ignored and lost and unloved because of some *disad-*

7 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant1263->

8 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47652/because-i-could-not-stop-for-death479->

vantage in the shape of our society. Emily was never disadvantaged. Emily needed, alone, to unshape society for herself. Society and those around her saw this as an affront, specifically a female one. Who can unmake society alone?

***Show me Eternity, and I will show you Memory—
Both in one package lain
And lifted back again—
Be Sue—while I am Emily—
Be next—what you have ever been—Infinity.*** ⁹

I have reclaimed Emily as my own. If parts of her life that resonated with mine hadn't been hidden for so long, would I have read her more deeply? Afforded her more of my time? I will now – I give her words more weight and seek them out, thirsty for what I may have read as queer in them but was told could not have possibly ever been there.

I was told that she could never be quite understood and that some of us should never try. But we persist, we shift, we take a hundred different looks and stick with our conviction – that we have always existed. Some of us will never stop looking for ourselves in history, because more often than not there we are – staring back out at ourselves, our kin, our kindred. Ancestors and descendants who survived, in spite of it all, and lived their lives as full as we try and find ways to live our lives now.

***I have intended to
write you Emily to-day but the
quiet has not been mine I send
you this, lest I should seem to
have turned away from a kiss –
If you have suffered this past
summer I am sorry I
Emily bear a sorrow that I
never uncover — — If a nightingale
sings with her breast against
a thorn, why not we
when I can I shall write –***

Sue ⁻¹⁰

9 Maria Popova” .Figuring “.published February2019

10 <https://:americanqueer.org/poetry/>