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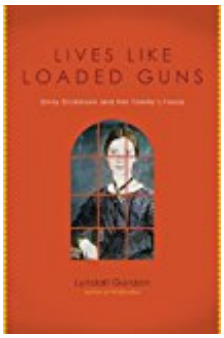
The Bombshell

The Dangerous Emily Dickinson



At the end of Lyndall Gordon's *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*, the biographer describes the source of the poet's genius as: "...a hidden life like a 'Bomb' in her bosom. The poetry it fueled," she advises, "must be seen in terms of New England individualism, the Emersonian ethos of self-reliance which in its fullest bloom eludes classification. It's more radical and quirky than anything in Europe, more awkward and less loveable than English eccentricity; in fact, dangerous."

It gives me enormous pleasure to inaugurate my *Bookslut* column, which I have entitled The Bombshell (*bomb-shell: a shattering or devastating act, event, etc.; a fair-haired person, esp. a woman, of startling vitality or physique*. -OED), with Gordon's bombshell of a book about one of literature's greatest bombshells, who also happened to be a flaming redhead.

"Dangerous" is hardly how I would have described the "Belle of Amherst." "Demure," "quaint," "virtuous," "retreating" come more readily to mind. The publication of *Lives Like Loaded Guns* (a title taken from the poem: "My Life has stood—a Loaded Gun") blows apart the persistent myth of the meek, fragile spinster of odd rhymes. Gordon shows us that Dickinson was a rebel who defied convention, her poetry volcanic, her lines thunderbolts from Vulcan's forge. At Mount Holyoke, Dickinson refused to declare herself a Christian. ("'Faith' is a fine invention/When Gentlemen can see—/But Microscopes are prudent/In an Emergency.") At eighteen, she deplored housework assignments: "...so many wants–and me so very handy– and my time of so little account – and my writing so very needless." She trumpeted gender issues: "Amputate my freckled Bosom!/Make me bearded like a man!" And though Emily fell in love several times, once seriously, she depicts marriage as "Born— Bridalled— Shrouded— /In a day— ."

Dickinson's confidence in her poetic ability was supreme: "It was given to me by the Gods —/When I was a little Girl—." She knew her work placed her ahead of her time, made her prophetic. Indeed, Gordon points out how the lines: "Perception of an Object costs/Precise the Object's loss— " (1865), anticipate Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. A ferociously ambitious

writer, Dickinson took great pains to ensure her work would one day reach the universal audience she knew it deserved. In selecting her friends she considered their worthiness as readers of her work -- in 1863 she sent 295 poems to her friends and family.

“Emily Dickinson,” Gordon emphatically states, “was *not* shut away from publishing.” The poet made repeated attempts to get her work into print. But publishers and editors wanted to conventionalize her poems by getting rid of those strange dashes and regularizing the rhyme. Emily preferred to wait until she could have her own way, even if it took an eternity. In 1858, Dickinson began to save her poems in homemade booklets threaded with string. By her death in 1886, there were 40 containing over 800 poems, with nearly 1000 more scribbled on backs of envelopes, wrapping paper, in newspaper margins, and letters, emphasizing the improvisational nature of her poetry, her poems in a constant state of becoming.

Gordon argues that Dickinson was possibly an epileptic, helping explain the poet’s reclusiveness -- deep shame was associated with the illness -- and her family’s great efforts to shield Emily from the outside world. Added to her health constraints was her father’s horror of any display suggesting female exhibitionism. Gordon describes the poet’s predicament:

> Wafting through the poems is a woman playing a counter-role: this purified creature has to freeze the life of the "Ethiop" within. Abandoned to solitude, she retires from existence; puts on purity in her white dress; assumes "Cobweb attitudes"; and hangs her head in ostensible submission. In this poetic role she enacts the appealing helplessness and self-effacement of nineteenth-century womanhood, but a cutting voice finds the role absurd:
>
> “Such was not the posture/Of our immortal mind— ”

Gordon simultaneously winds up and unravels the intricate strands of Dickinson’s family life: her closeness to her austere father; her reliance on and respect for her sister Lavinia; her adoration and distrust of her brother Austin; her intellectual and emotional bond with Austin’s wife Susan Gilbert; her diffidence towards Austin’s lover Mabel Loomis Todd, the flamboyant, ambitious woman who, following Emily’s death, would singlehandedly do the most to maintain the integrity of the poet’s work and secure its enduring publication. Mabel also tampered with the poems and letters to eliminate from record Susan’s central role in Emily’s life and work. The conflict between Susan and Mabel culminated in a struggle for copyright ownership of Dickinson’s poems. The feud passed to the rivals’ daughters -- Millicent Dickinson and Mattie Todd -- and gravely contributed to the suppression and misconception of the poet’s work.

Like many students, one of the first poems I loved was:

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you— Nobody— Too?
> Then there's a pair of us! Don't tell!
> they'd advertise— you know!
>
> How dreary— to be— Somebody!
> How public— like a Frog—
> To tell one's name— the livelong June—
> To an admiring Bog!

What I had intuited, but didn't understand until reading Gordon's book, is that Emily Dickinson's Nobody went way beyond the superficial, popular, candle-in-the-wind Somebody to an Immortal Godlike Nobody. Her question to her reader is not: are you a nobody like me? Rather, it is: do you dare to aspire to be a Nobody like me? Her seemingly modest poem (again, that counter-role persona), anticipates another great poet -- T.S. Eliot -- by posing that terrifying, dangerous question: Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? Dickinson's answer is a resounding Yes.

Lyndall Gordon's own immense talent as a writer and storyteller is evident as she interweaves the poet's work into the poet's story, allowing the juxtapositions to illuminate the life and the poetry. She has created a complex vision of an "explosive" mind contending with the oppressive attitudes the culture enforced upon women. As the poet herself describes it, hers was "A Still— Volcano— life." *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* is an exquisite perpetration of Herstory.