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NOBODY-BUT-HIMSELF

who are you,little i

(five or six years old)
peering from some high

window;at the gold

of november sunset

(and feeling;that if day
has to become night

this is a beautiful way)

(*Complete* 824)

So Cummings, the man, describes himself as a little boy looking from a window in his Cambridge home. The month is November, and his family would have returned a month or two before from their summer home in New Hampshire.

Year-round residents remember him as he arrived each noontime at the Silver Lake post office, driving a vintage Ford faded to a dull green. He was a tall, spare man, dressed in nondescript pants, a chambray shirt, and a battered brown fedora. Almost always he wore a pair of white garden gloves. He rarely had much to say. Marion, his wife, discharged the business of the day; and if they stopped at Gilman Brothers' store where she shopped for a few necessities, he would wait outside, arms folded across his chest, gazing out over the lake.

Cummings described himself as "an author of pictures, a draughtsman of words." Throughout most of his life he did exactly as he wished and wrote exactly what he wanted to write. He celebrated life and being alive, saying "a world of made is not a world of born." He was steadfastly unscientific. He is the foremost celebrant of love among poets of our time, cautioning us:

be of love(a little)
more careful
than of everything (453)

For Cummings the word *freedom* is a synonym for democracy, and the word *individual* is a synonym for love.

He was called a cynic, a communist, a fascist, an anarchist, an anti-Semite, a Negro-hater. He said: "I'm an individual. In an age of standardization it's almost impossible to express the attitude of an individual. If 180 million people want to be undead that's their funeral, but I happen to like being alive." To Cummings being undead is not the same as being alive. Further, he said: "To like an individual because he's black is just as insulting as to dislike him because he isn't white. An individual is unique—or else like mostpeople, he's not an individual."

As a teenager in the '40s, I helped out at the Silver Lake post office, where my mother was Postmaster. I was acquainted with the man, but I was unaware of his significance. Cummings mailed large manila envelopes and received heavy manila envelopes back, but I did not speculate. It was none of my business as a postal volunteer or as a mind-your-own-business Yankee. As so many do, I moved away—to college, to raise a family, and ultimately to teach English in a secondary school. My mother and Marion Cummings became good friends, and my mother passed along to me the autographed books, some signed by Estlin, some by Marion, as they were given to her. My American Literature students sensed that Cummings was a live poet, and a lesson plan to devote two days to his poems would expand to a week as they accepted the challenge to choose one poem they understood and one that they didn't for the whole class to work with.

Retired, I returned to the town where I grew up. As I reabsorbed the lake, the mountain, and the village and realized how much they had influenced my own development, my thoughts turned to our summer poet. How important were those summers spent in Silver Lake, so briefly referred to by his biographers, to him as a person, a painter, and a poet? To what degree did his time in our hills and woodlands, in and on our lake, form the man and inform the poet?

I

Edward Estlin Cummings was two years old when he first came to Joy Farm. His father, Edward Cummings, pastor of South Congregational Church, Unitarian, in Boston, bought the farm so named for the family that owned it. Cummings' sister, Elizabeth, wrote in a little book for her children and grandchildren that the name was truly appropriate because they were most happy there. The farm, now officially designated as an historic site, lies some distance back from the gravel road that leads to it, two miles or so from the village. At first, a local man, Sam Ward, actually worked the place as a farm year-round for them. The children played in haymows and lurched around the fields driving Old Jack, the donkey, hitched to their wagon. The family

frequently climbed Mount Chocorua, whose proud peak dominated their view to the west. Estlin and Elizabeth helped to clear the trail from Joy Farm through the forest to Madison Boulder to the east.

When Estlin was in his teens, his father built a cottage near Hurricane Point on Silver Lake. No road led to the site, and all building materials had to be hauled across the lake by boat. So did the furnishings. Old-timers never forgot the arrival of the square piano. It was unloaded from the baggage car of the train and carted down to the shore of the lake. The legs were removed, and the piano was placed athwart two canoes. The family motor boat, which required Reverend Cummings to coax the motor and his sister to steer, towed the piano safely to its new home.

In her book Elizabeth describes a boating accident when she was ten and Estlin sixteen. The family had gone for a sunset cruise in the motor boat. Estlin and Elizabeth decided to go out in the canvas canoe. They agreed that the two wooden boxes in the canoe would suffice as life preservers. They took Estlin's dog with them. Some distance out, in the broadest part of the lake, a particularly persistent deerfly annoyed the terrier, who lunged for it, capsizing the canoe. As the canoe sank, Estlin and Elizabeth each grabbed a floating box. Estlin's just barely held his head above water. The dog had begun to swim for shore, but finding it farther away than he wanted to go, he returned to the children. He repeatedly jumped on Elizabeth, pushing her under the water each time. Estlin made a very difficult choice. He drowned the terrier. The children were rescued by the family in the motor boat, but Estlin never again owned a dog.

By 1916 Cummings had received a Master's degree from Harvard University, and he joined the Ambulance Corps in France in 1917. He and his friend, William Slater Brown, chafed under military discipline, and Brown's satirical letters home aroused the French censors' suspicions. Brown was arrested. Armed with his ever-present sketch pad, Cummings insisted on going along, too. Both were confined in a French concentration camp for three months. Reverend Cummings exerted his considerable influence, even to the extent of writing to President Wilson, to obtain the young men's release. Upon his return to the United States, Cummings was drafted and sent to Fort Devens early in 1918. Fortunately, the war ended before he finished his training.

Cummings wrote *The Enormous Room* in 1922 at Joy Farm and in a tree house on Hurricane Point. A newly cut trail leads from East Shore Drive to the height of the land at the Point, where one can discern two stumps and a fallen log—the remains of the three pine trees among which the tree house was built. The book has been called a novel, but it is an autobiographical account of his concentration camp experience. The room was huge indeed—some eighty feet long—and its many inmates became the characters

in the book. It is vaguely modeled on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the "delectable mountains" he discovered were fellow prisoners. In the last few chapters the prose anticipates the poetry to come. One reviewer discovered "gold among the garbage," calling it "a queer, strong, defeated book, all smeared and smattered with genius."

During the '20s Cummings contributed poems, essays, and sketches to *The Dial* and settled in at 4 Patchin Place, Greenwich Village. He did not settle, however, into two marriages. He traveled frequently, mostly to Paris, speaking French as fluently as English, and continued to write in a style that confounded critics. He omitted capitals where they were expected; most notably he designated the first person singular with a little *i*. He reasoned that no other language capitalizes it. Besides, he remembered a letter Sam Ward had sent from Silver Lake one winter in which he wrote a little *i* in reference to himself but had capitalized the first letters of the real news: the Big Snow. Cummings similarly disregarded conventional rules for punctuation. Because a comma or a semicolon indicates a pause, there is no need for a space after them. He had other uses for spaces. Jacobs, his typographer, said, "There is to me a definite reason for everything he does on the page." In addition, the content of many of his poems was shocking. It still is.

II

On May 22, 1990, *The Grand Rapids Press* ran a front-page article reporting controversy at the regular meeting of the Grand Rapids Board of Education. At issue was whether or not to accept a textbook containing a poem by E. E. Cummings that some of the Board members found objectionable. The editor of the newspaper printed the poem, asking his readers to be judges:

she being Brand

-new;and you
know consequently a
little stiff i was
careful of her and(having

thoroughly oiled the universal
joint tested my gas felt of
her radiator made sure her springs were O.

K.)i went right to it flooded-the-carburetor cranked her

up,slipped the
clutch(and then somehow got into reverse she
kicked what

the hell)next
minute i was back in neutral tried and

again slo-wly;bare,ly nudg. ing(my

lev-er Right-
oh and her gears being in
A 1 shape passed
from low through
second-in-to-high like
greasedlightning)just as we turned the corner of Divinity

avenue i touched the accelerator and give

her the juice,good
(it

was the first ride and believe i we was
happy to see how nice she acted right up to
the last minute coming back down by the Public
Gardens i slammed on

the
internalexpanding
&
externalcontracting
brakes Bothatonce and

brought allofher tremB
-ling
to a:dead.

stand-
;Still)

(*Complete* 246)

The editor received quite a bit of flak for allowing such "trash" to appear on the front page for all to read, and a few days later he responded:

> Despite lots of newsroom jokes about auto emissions, there really was a serious discussion over how to handle both the poem and the story of the school board meeting. We had a responsibility to not offend you or your children. I approved both publication of the full poem and the headline over it—"You be the judge . . ."
>
> I knew there would be complaints. There is no question that this poem, as with virtually everything else cummings composed, contains sexual double meaning and layers of meaning and symbolism. That's why cummings is often included in anthologies of great literature (and I am not). In this particular poem, the double meanings are not explicitly or overtly obvious, especially to young people. I felt there was no risk in "letting" you see it. At one time or another, most adults have ridden in a new car or visited a showroom anyway. . . . We placed the story at the top of the front page because it was by far the most interesting news of the day. . . .

Cummings often arranges the lines of his poems in seemingly strange ways:

un(bee)mo

vi
n(in)g
are(th
e)you(o
nly)

asl(rose)eep

(*Complete* 691)

The key is to read everything within the parentheses first, then to begin again at the top with the remaining words: Bee in the only rose, unmoving. Are you asleep? If that is all he meant to say, why didn't he write it that way? He wants us to discover the bee for ourselves as perhaps a bee surprised him when he peered into the heart of a rose. Why the "only" rose? Because our attention is completely focused at the moment on one particular blossom, it is as though no other rose exists. Why isn't the bee moving? Has he gathered so much nectar that he is too heavy to move? Is he dead? Is he sleeping the sleep of the sated?

In another poem, in which he celebrates both spring and love—two of his favorite topics—he arranges the lines to reveal, rather than to conceal, a mystery:

because it's

Spring
thingS

dare to do people

(& not
the other way

round)because it

's A
pril

Lives lead their own

persons(in
stead

of everybodyelse's)but

what's wholly
marvellous my

Darling

is that you &
i are more than you

& i(be

ca
us

e It's we)

(*Complete* 782)

Shortening the lines and lengthening the poem extend the ebullience. One bounces from line to line, propelled by Spring, to find "us" standing on its own within the word "because" and the "It" that is "we" (love) important enough to capitalize.

Cummings uses the same technique to capture the sudden surprise—and the denial—we feel at the instant of hearing of the death of someone we know:

o

the round

little man we
loved so isn't

no!w

a gay of a
brave and
a true of a

who have

r
olle
d i

nt

o
n
o

w(he)re

(*Complete* 606)

The "o" of surprise outlines the shape of the little man who is no longer ("no!") a part of "now." He and his attributes, each stammered and unfinished, have "rolled into nowhere." "O no" indicates denial once again. "He" is "here" in the last line.

III

At the end of the decade, in 1928, Cummings' play entitled *Him* was produced at the Provincetown Playhouse. Written with three acts and twenty-one scenes, it required thirty actors to play 107 characters. It ran to a full house for six weeks and was not performed again until 1948. Even then the leading lady wondered if the play was ahead of its time. (Has its time come yet?)

Cummings visited the Soviet Union in 1931. Other Americans were traveling there in groups—artists, curious scholars, the politically disillusioned—this was the time, after all, of the Great Depression. They were being shown only what the government wanted them to see. Cummings, however, traveled on his own, and saw what there was to see: a country filled with undead people:

kumrads die because they're told)
kumrads die before they're old
(kumrads aren't afraid to die
kumrads don't
and kumrads won't
believe in life)and death knows whie

(all good kumrads you can tell
by their altruistic smell
moscow pipes good kumrads dance)
kumrads enjoy
s. freud knows whoy
the hope that you may mess your pance

every kumrad is a bit
of quite unmitigated hate
(travelling in a futile groove
god knows why)
and so do i
(because they are afraid to love

(*Complete* 413)

In 1933 Cummings published a book based on his Russian experience. "When the book appeared," he said, "some of my 'best friends' crossed the street to avoid . . . me." Not only was he shunned by some of his friends, but publishers rejected his poems. Finally, in 1938, another book of poetry went to press because his mother financed it.

Cummings was capable of expressing his unconventional thoughts in traditional ways. He mastered the sonnet form—"who were so dark of heart" is one of his finest. However, even a poem that appears child-like in its simplicity, that rhymes, that has a definite, dependable rhythm in each line, has a deeper purpose than mere entertainment:

maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach(to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles,and

milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles:and

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose(like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea

(*Complete* 682)

Four girls go down to the shore, and whatever they find there—and their response to it—reveals who they are. Troubled Maggie finds solace in the music of a shell. Friendly Milly reaches out to a limp starfish. Timid Molly flees from a crab. May chooses one round stone (the "only" stone for her, like the bee in the "only" rose, perhaps?), and takes it home with her. She is a seeker of significance, finding in the stone both a microcosm and a symbol of her loneness in the large world. But we, too, says the poet, find ourselves when we go to the sea. What self would you find?

IV

Cummings' father was killed in an automobile accident in 1926. The monument that stands on the public beach at the northern end of Silver Lake is dedicated to Reverend Cummings and to Walter Kennett [for photographs, see pages 14 and 15 in this issue]. When I asked my father why these two men were so honored, he replied, "They were both good men, highly respected." One, Walter Kennett, was a native; the other, "from away." After Edward Cummings' death, the family divided the New Hampshire property. Estlin's mother and his sister, now Elizabeth Qualey, spent their summers at the cottage on the lake. Estlin's place was Joy Farm.

He first brought Marion Morehouse, the love of his life, to Joy Farm in 1934. He wrote in a letter to his mother, "All the natives seem to be crazy over my wife and she's feeling slicker'n a weasel—how be you?" Marion, twelve years his junior, was born in Indiana and went to New York City as an aspiring actress. Too tall for the chorus line, she became a model. Photographer Edward Steichen described her as "the greatest fashion model I ever shot." (I remember her as a stunningly handsome woman, no matter how casually she dressed.) In the years from 1934 until Estlin's death, they summered in Silver Lake, traveling abroad for part of the summer only twice. Marion was his companion, cook, housekeeper, inspiration, secretary, protector from intrusion; and whereas he could be downright antisocial (firing a rifle into the air on one occasion to discourage unwanted guests),

Marion was always gracious in her interaction with others. The natives remained crazy over her.

I sometimes introduced Cummings to my students as "the spoiled brat of American letters." As the son of a much-admired and respected Unitarian minister growing up in a comfortable home in Cambridge and enjoying a summer place in New Hampshire, educated at Harvard University (of course), he can be said to qualify as a member of New England's elite. However, I was referring to the love that was lavished upon him (if love truly "spoils" anyone). We have seen that his father moved heaven and earth (and President Wilson) to secure Cummings' release from the French prison, and his mother financed the printing of one of his books of poetry. That Cummings returned their love with affection is revealed in his letters. In a poem, he wrote of his mother: "if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have / one . . ." (353). In 1939 he wrote a powerful tribute to his father, considering it a major turning point in his life. "my father moved through dooms of love" it begins, and many stanzas later (it is one of his longest poems) it ends:

> though dull were all we taste as bright,
> bitter all utterly things sweet,
> maggoty minus and dumb death
> all we inherit,all bequeath
>
> and nothing quite so least as truth
> —i say though hate were why men breathe—
> because my father lived his soul
> love is the whole and more than all (521)

Estlin and Marion lived frugally. They didn't need or want much. They depended on a few local folks to ease their summer stay. The Shackfords on High Street prepared the place for the Cummings' arrival each May. A lovely old lady did their laundry. In time it fell to a younger generation of the Shackford family to look after their interests. Bud mowed the fields to keep the underbrush at bay and attended to the necessary repairs. Ruth cleaned the house before they arrived each spring and closed it for the winter after they left. Occasionally she was asked to bake for them. Marion described Ruth's cake as "so light it practically floats off the plate!" When the Boston and Maine Railroad no longer offered service to Madison, Ruth met their train in Dover and drove them "home." Estlin would insist on riding in front with Ruth because he wanted to talk.

Letters from Cummings to Ruth reveal the warmth he felt for the Shackford family and others, as well as his eager anticipation of returning

to Joy Farm once again. Though the business of his letter might concern the cutting of timber on his property or reminding Bud, with a check enclosed, to register the '29 Ford, he would typically close: "Hope to hear from you again soon. Estlin." (Note the capital "E"!) In another letter he wrote: "Please thank Buddy for taking such wonderful care of Joy Farm. I guess he knows how much it means to us to feel that the place we love best in the world is sound and safe. P.S. & love to Chocorua Mountain."

Joy Farm. For many years there was no electricity. They read by kerosene lamplight, and heated water, pulled from the well by an old-fashioned sweep, on the wood stove in the kitchen. But the screened porch faced Chocorua Mountain. And north was over the barn:

> moon
> 's whis-
> per
> in sunset
>
> or thrushes toward dusk among whippoorwills or
> tree field rock hollyhock forest brook chickadee
> mountain. Mountain)
> whycoloured worlds of because do
>
> not stand against yes which is built by
> forever & sunsmell
> (sometimes a wonder
> of wild roses
>
> sometimes)
> with north
> over
> the barn (512)

Here he captures the sights and sounds of Joy Farm at sunset, bird songs intermingling, Chocorua dominating the view to the west. Unlike other worlds that demand answers or reasons to explain the causes of things, this little world frees him to be alive in the way he knows best: in the affirmation—"yes"—of life.

Estlin and Marion enjoyed the wildlife that shared their farm. They fed the squirrels and chipmunks and were thrilled when deer came to the apple tree that grew by the barn. The birds intrigued Estlin. Attracted first by their songs, he became a birder; and birds are the subject of many of his poems. Typically, though, those poems carry another message:

now(more near ourselves than we)
is a bird singing in a tree,
who never sings the same thing twice
and still that singing's always his

eyes can feel but ears may see
there never lived a gayer he;
if earth and sky should break in two
he'd make them one(his song's so true)

who sings for us for you for me
for each leaf newer than can be:
and for his own(his love)his dear
he sings till everywhere is here

(*Complete* 760)

How can a bird's song bring everywhere else to one specific place? When a person listens to it with his whole being, there is no other place. He is not aware of anything else. The world is concentrated, all of it, into here and now.

On their way to or from the village, Estlin and Marion frequently stopped at my great-uncle's farm for fresh produce or just to check on the growth of things. Not surprisingly, Uncle Frank and his son and daughter-in-law show up in the next poem:

now comes the good rain farmers pray for(and
no sharp shrill shower bouncing up off
burned earth but a blind blissfully seething
gift wandering deeply through godthanking ground

bluest whos of this snowy head we call
old frank go bluer still as(shifting his life
from which to which)he reaches the barn's immense
doorway and halts propped on a pitchfork(breathing)

lovers like rej and lena smile(while looming
darkly a kindness of fragrance opens around
them)and whisper their joy under entirely the coming
quitenotimaginable silenceofsound

(here is that rain awaited by leaves with all
their trees and by forests with all their mountains)

(*Complete* 754)

Cummings knows the kind of rain the parched earth needs for growing things, the kind that sinks deeply into the ground. Uncle Frank shifts his life (his task) with the change in the weather, and he has limped from the field to stand at the barn door to watch the welcome rain. It may have come just in time to save the crop. The drought ends for the trees in the forests as well. The inversions—"leaves with all their trees" and "forests with all their mountains"—dramatize the silent reversal in the weather.

V

In the 50s Cummings began to receive the recognition he so richly deserved both as a lyric and satiric poet. In 1952, at the age of fifty-eight, he was Harvard's Norton Professor of Poetry. He asked to postpone his arrival on campus until October 15 so that he wouldn't miss the turning of the foliage in New Hampshire. He delivered the required six lectures, no more, no less, calling them his "nonlectures." He didn't like the increased demand for public readings—it took him away from his work—but he was a consummate actor and serious in response to his audience. On one occasion he changed the content of his reading, selecting poems he thought more appropriate, when he observed a group of nuns entering the college auditorium.

Occasionally he answered correspondence. One youth, who aspired to be a poet, sent a packet of his work for Cummings' critique. Cummings' answer was cryptic: "Learn English; it's a beautiful language." On another occasion, in 1955, he was moved to answer a letter from the editor of the high school newspaper in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who wanted to know what it is like to be poet. Cummings wrote:

> A poet is somebody who feels, and who expresses his feelings through words.
>
> This may sound easy. It isn't.
>
> A lot of people think or believe or know they feel—but that's thinking or believing or knowing; not feeling. And poetry is feeling—not knowing or believing or thinking.
>
> Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.
>
> To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.

As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn't a poet can possibly imagine. Why? Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time—and whenever we do it, we're not poets.

If, at the end of your first ten or fifteen years of fighting and working and feeling, you find you've written one line of one poem, you'll be very lucky indeed.

And so my advice to all young people who wish to become poets is: do something easy, like learning how to blow up the world—unless you are not only willing, but glad, to feel and work and fight till you die.

Does this sound dismal? It isn't.

It's the most wonderful life on earth.

Or so I feel. (*A Miscellany Revised* 335)

Cummings ends his advice with the most important verb, so consistent with the content: *feel*. He demonstrates feeling in one of his best-known poems about it:

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
—the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other:then
laugh,leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

(*Complete* 291)

To kiss completely, one must not be concerned with "syntax" or with "wisdom," but immersed in feeling. Life (synonymous here with love?) is not merely a paragraph, reduced to a part of the whole. It is whole. The final line—"and death i think is no parenthesis"—can perhaps be understood as suggesting that death is not an enclosure.

Cummings was invited to read at the Boston Arts Festival in 1957. He was asked to choose whatever of his poetry he would like to present, but to presubmit to the Committee one poem that he regarded as special. He sent them a copy of "THANKSGIVING (1956)," one of the few poems to which he gave a title. The Committee disapproved. Very well, then, he wouldn't read. Marion intervened, suggesting another—one that he regarded highly, the one about a little church. The Committee accepted both, and on June 23, 1957, eight to ten thousand people listened to him Boston Public Gardens:

THANKSGIVING (1956)

a monstering horror swallows
this unworld me by you
as the god of our fathers' fathers bows
to the which that walks like a who

but the voice-with-a-smile of democracy
announces night & day
"all poor little peoples that want to be free
just trust in the u s a"

suddenly uprose hungary
and she gave a terrible cry
"no slave's unlife shall murder me
for i will freely die"

she cried so high thermopylae
heard her and marathon
and all prehuman history
and finally The UN

"be quiet little hungary
and do as you are bid
a good kind bear is angary
we fear for the quo pro quid"

uncle sam shrugs his pretty
pink shoulders you know how
and he twitches a liberal titty
and lisps "i'm busy right now"

so rah-rah-rah democracy
let's all be as thankful as hell
and bury the statue of liberty
(because it begins to smell)

(*Complete* 711)

There was deep silence when he finished reading and then a roar of applause. No doubt the Committee breathed a sigh of relief.

Walter Bailey, pastor of the Madison Church, told the story behind the second poem he read, one that Cummings regarded as his very best. Marion told Reverend Bailey that she and Estlin had been out to dinner that August evening in 1945. Coming home, they passed the lighted church. The bell was ringing. People were entering the church to pray. They had just received word that the Second World War was over. Cummings, deeply touched, went home and wrote the poem:

i am a little church(no great cathedral)
far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities
—i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,
i am not sorry when sun and rain make april

my life is the life of the reaper and sower;
my prayers are prayers of earth's own clumsy striving
(finding and losing and laughing and crying)children
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

around me surges a miracle of unceasing
birth and glory and death and resurrection:
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols
of hope,and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

i am a little church(far from the frantic
world with its rapture and anguish)at peace with nature
—i do not worry if longer nights grow longest;
i am not sorry when silence becomes singing

winter by spring,i lift my diminutive spire to
merciful Him Whose only now is forever:
standing erect in the deathless truth of His presence
(welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness)

(*Complete* 749)

In choosing these two poems, Cummings demonstrated his power as both a satiric and lyric poet. He recoils with horror from the monstrous oppression of Hungary. He admires the courage of a people who prefer death to enslavement. He is bitterly disappointed in the UN's failure to respond to their plight. He is disgusted with his own country, which he portrays as simperingly feminine. In contrast, the lyricism of the little church sings a hymn in praise of the seasons, of the unhurried pace in a small town, of the struggling children of the earth ("like a you or a me"), and above all, of merciful Him. These, then, are portraits of the artist as rebel and lover, arrogant and tender.

Marion, a photographer's model before she married Estlin, turned to photography herself in her later years. Her pictures, along with Estlin's captions, were to be published in *Adventures in Value*, a book bearing both their names. On September 2, 1962, he drove the final draft of their book to my mother's post office in Silver Lake to catch the 3:15 southbound train. Later, in the early evening, he suffered what was to be a fatal stroke. Marion told my mother that he was sitting on the porch watching the sunset.

Sunset.
Chocorua Mountain.
Just so.

VI

Cummings' insistence on being alive, as opposed to being "undead"; on rejoicing in the world of "born," not the world of "made"; on feeling, because it is more true than thinking or knowing or believing; may all be well and good for him, we might say, but highly impracticable for ordinary people. Nevertheless, he urges us not to be "mostpeople":

in time of daffodils(who know
the goal of living is to grow)
forgetting why,remember how

in time of lilacs who proclaim
the aim of waking is to dream,
remember so(forgetting seem)

in time of roses(who amaze
our now and here with paradise)
forgetting if,remember yes

in time of all sweet things beyond
whatever mind may comprehend,
remember seek(forgetting find)

and in a mystery to be
(when time from time shall set us free)
forgetting me,remember me

(*Complete* 688)

Time. Each of us is allotted a lot or a little of it. His repetition of the words "in time" reminds us that this is true. How shall we live it? Emulate the daffodils, the first flowers of spring. Their purpose is to grow. They don't ask why and neither should we; our concern must be how we shall grow. Because so much of what we accept as reality is illusion, Cummings thinks of awareness as dreaming. (Was he dreaming as he stood outside Gilman's Store gazing out over the lake, or was he acutely aware of the surroundings and his inner reality?) The lilac reminds us to apprehend what is, not what appears to be. The perfection of roses hints at a better world, but their beauty insists that we embrace the present precious moment, refusing to lose it in vague yearnings for what might be. There is a quality in living that is more than a matter of knowing or doing. That "sweet" something enables us to enjoy process in living. Process is now. Goal is then. Live in the present process, whatever it may be.

The final stanza does not begin, as the others do, with the words "in time." Time has run out. Cummings anticipates that death would free him from time—from life. He tells us: "forgetting me,remember me." Can he really mean that we should forget him? (His poem recalls him to us.) However, the "me" that he would have each of us remember is our own "little i" that is living today. Live it as an individual. Remember to like being alive. "Yes!"

One measure of Cummings' art is that two paragraphs of prose are not sufficient to explicate all that he has packed into this concise little poem.

Picture him sipping his favorite Scotch at 4 Patchin Place, or absorbing the streets of Paris with all of his senses, or standing at the easel in the back field at Joy Farm, painting Chocorua Mountain one more time. Wherever he is, whatever he does, Cummings is all of a piece—poet, painter, person.

Who was this "little i"?

He was nobody-but-himself.

—*Silver Lake, New Hampshire*