

LETTERS FROM THE CUMMINGSES TO RUTH SHACKFORD

Among the fruits of the Society's visit to Silver Lake in 1996 were the letters Cummings and Marion wrote to Ruth Shackford in her capacity as chief local contact person during their times away. She was kind enough to let us have copies of the correspondence, and we are grateful to her and the E. E. Cummings Copyright Trust © George J. Firmage, agent, for permission to reprint portions thereof here.

Many of the letters have to do with housekeeping details, but a number go well beyond the mundane, and it is these latter we'd like to bring out at this time.

I

We'll begin with Cummings himself, writing on November 20, 1957, about the launching of Sputnik, October 4th of that year, and remembering his visit to the Soviet Union in 1931:

speaking of the Russian "satellite"—some years ago I went to Russia; & saw for myself (thanks to a special passport-visa, as well as some extraordinary luck) what no American tourist so much as suspects. Soviet Russia is one enormous prison, a huge slave-state in which any "citizen" may at any moment be murdered by the Secret Police—and if somebody protests, his wife or children or parents or sweetheart or whoever he loves most may disappear & never be heard of again. You can imagine what I think of the American "intellectuals" who want the USA to become just like Russia as soon as possible!

as for the so-called world of the future: am too busy living in the present to fall for any such nonsense. Air—unless I'm very much mistaken—is to breathe; & the more machines (particularly planes & rockets & spaceships) are invented, the less breathable the air is. Everybody except an idiot (or a "scientist") should be able to see where that leads

One can see that his anti-Soviet stance remained as prescient in 1957 as it was in 1931, in the wake of our World War II alliance and the Cold War that followed. One can also see his anticipating future environmental concerns. So we find him writing nearly four years later, January 15, 1961:

I remember being astonished when, after a trip to the “Soviet Union”, I realized that whereas Russians conform because it’s that or BANG, Americans—or rather Unamericans—conform because it’s always the easiest thing to do. Being yourself when everybody’s being everybody else isn’t easy at all. In my humble opinion, nothing takes quite so much courage

Whereas in the first letter he focuses on the brutality of the Soviet state, here he focuses on its enforced conformity, wondering at the *voluntary* conformity of people in the United States—a not unusual thought at the end of the Grey-Flannel-Suit 1950s.

Several of his letters to Mrs. Shackford, however, concern themselves with more local and specific matters—for example, the weathers and seasons at Silver Lake. I have elsewhere pointed out that Cummings was not simply the poet of spring, as has often been claimed, but that he also wrote movingly about fall and winter. So we find him writing on January 11, 1960:

thanks for your fine letter of December 28th. I felt homesick reading about the snowfall. New Yorkers are frightened of snow; but I always hope to revisit Silver Lake in midwinter. Marion (as am pretty sure I once wrote you) has a watercolour picture painted upstairs at Joy Farm when the temperature outside was 26 below. We’d shut off the whole upstairs part of the house; so I took a kerosene heater with me & put my water supply on top of it. Even so the water started to freeze—& on the shoulder of Chocorua mountain, in my picture, you can see the exquisite flowerlike shapes made by ice crystals

And, of course, he writes, on April 4, 1960:

spring is arriving here (after some late-winter weather) which naturally makes me long for Joy Farm. I’d like to make sure we have birds in our bird-house this year, but am afraid it’s not in good shape. Someone tore a big hole in it with a shotgun & it probably needs a good cleaning. Would you please ask Buddy to take a look & see what he thinks? If we need a new bird-house, say the word & I’ll order it right away so he can put it up before the swallows come [see photo]

II

Marion, on the other hand, in her capacity as the organizer of their visits to Joy Farm, wrote mostly about the domestic arrangements for their residences and absences at Silver Lake. After Cummings’ death on September 3, 1962, however, she cannot help but open up her store of grief and loss. On October 16th of that year, she writes:

***The present bird-
house at Joy Farm***

Photograph by
David V. Forrest, M.D



Dear Ruth—What a darling you are to write such a comforting and consoling letter. I'm so glad that the heavy rains did no damage and that you are looking after Joy Farm so carefully.

I'm sorry to hear of all the colds and of Elaine's [the Shackford's daughter] pneumonia. But how lucky you are that there are the drugs against pneumonia. I remember once when I had a very bad cold which hung on and on the doctor said "We can't cure the cold. Now if you only had pneumonia we *could* do something."

I've been having a difficult time and Sunday, Estlin's birthday [October 14], just about finished me. But I'm stronger and can eat again and will be alright. Thirty years habits [they met in 1932] can't be changed overnight.

Worthy of notice is how she shows concern for the Shackfords before mentioning her own feelings.

On February 7, 1963, she writes:

I'm glad you're enjoying the bird book. Estlin and I thought it the best because of the purple finch description. There had been birds who came every year and loved those firs at the north west side of the house and nested there. We thought them purple finches but all the books we had, gave descriptions that just didn't fit. Then the [Roger Tony] Peterson book said that the male looked as though he had been sprinkled with or dipped in raspberry juice and that was it. That purple but raspberry color. I'm still waiting for the record with bird calls. When it comes, I'll send it on.

We imagine that this interest helped keep her memory of Estlin fresh for herself.

On September 10th of that same year she writes:

New York is hot and too full of people and I think of how much longer Estlin and I used to stay in Silver Lake and I do miss it very much. The noise that the neighbors' air conditioners make is really very wearing. It seems to exhaust me.

I want you to know how very much I appreciate what you have done for me. If I didn't have you and your family to help I'm afraid I couldn't keep on Joy Farm.

The last quote comes from her letter of February 27, 1965, where again she permits herself a personal note two-and-a-half years after Cummings' death:

So far this winter I've escaped illness but oh! the loneliness—there's no escape from that; even though I'm busy and seeing people all the time.

I think of Joy Farm and hope I can get up early this spring. My plans aren't all made yet. Johnny may come up for a while but his father has had a serious operation—a lung removed and he may have to be at home in Canada a lot. He's finished the illustrations for Estlin's fairy tales and it will be a lovely book, I think, and out in the fall. You'll get one of the first copies. [*Fairy Tales*, pictures by John Eaton, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965.]

—*Flushing, New York*