

e. e. cummings

(1894-1962)

anyone lived in a pretty how town (1940)

anyone lived in a pretty how town  
(with up so floating many bells down)  
spring summer autumn winter  
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance  
(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon  
(and only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess  
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)  
summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came  
sun moon stars and rain

## ANALYSIS

In harmony with the cycling seasons and the changing weathers, in a pretty town filled with the sound of bells, unpretentiously lived two individuals, named “anyone” and “noone,” whose story Cummings here tenderly tells. By ordinary standards their lives were uneventful: they loved each other, married, shared joy and grief, died, and were buried side by side. But because of their lack of self-importance (*he* could have been anyone, *she* was no one in particular), because they lived close to nature (“tree by leaf” and “bird by snow”), and, most of all, because they had learned the secret of love (“anyone’s any was all to her”), Cummings regards them with affection and identifies them with the things he most deeply loves and praises (earth and april, wish and spirit, and “yes”).

But “anyone” and “noone” are rarities. Most people are the “busy folk,” the self-important “someones” and “everyones,” the “Women and men (both little and small)” who do not care for anyone except themselves. These people sow “their isn’t” and reap “their same”: their lives are drained of significance by their inability to love. For them the music of the town’s bells is jangled, and love is reduced to sex “(both dong and ding).”

In between, of course, are the children. A few of them, in their innocence, guess “anyone’s” and “noone’s” secret of love, but, alas, they forget it and grow up to be “someones” and “everyones.” The basic contrast of the poem is between the quiet but meaningful lives of “anyone” and “noone” and the busy but meaningless lives of these “someones” and “everyones.” These latter “said their nevers” and “slept their dream” (note past tense); the former died (“i guess”) and “dream their sleep” (note present tense). The difference between “slept their dream” and “dream their sleep” is the difference between death and life, between mortality and some form of immortality.

To understand this poem properly, one must first read it disregarding the usual meanings of *anyone* and *no one* and regarding these words simply as proper names—“anyone” and “noone.” But then, having grasped the basic story, one can restore the usual meanings and glimpse secondary meanings and ambiguities. “Women and men” cared not at all for “anyone” or for anyone. “Noone” loved him, of course, but no one (else) did. Not only was “anyone’s” any all to “noone,” but *anyone’s* any was all to her--she loved all people. When “anyone” died, no one but “noone” stooped to kiss his face.

Cummings is up to his old tricks with language here--the dislocation of normal syntax; the employment of various parts of speech as nouns, the elimination of capitals (except for two W’s) and of punctuation (except for parentheses and one period). To explain all of the effects he gains by these devices would trouble the reader’s patience. The two capital W’s, of course, give to “Women and men” the self-importance which the more humble “anyone” and “noone” lack. The inversion of word order in the first lines makes *how* both exclamatory (how pretty!) and interrogative (pretty--how?). (*Answer*: Pretty in its bells, its weathers and seasons, its children, and the love of “anyone” and “noone,” but not pretty in the lovelessness of its “someones” and “everyones.”) The apparent redundancy of “(both little and small)” brings out not only the physical littleness of the inhabitants as measured against their cosmic background (in this sense “anyone” and “noone” are little, too) but their spiritual smallness.

But perhaps the chief beauty of this poem is in the loveliness of its sound [as in Poe]. Hardly a line of it does not echo in its words or syntax some other of its lines. The repetitions fill the air with their chiming, as of bells. The rhythmic variety of the poem also delights the ear. And the repetitions and the rhythm together reinforce the repetitions and variations of the cycling seasons and the changing weathers—“sun moon stars rain.”

Laurence Perrine  
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