

Three Statements (1926, 1938, 1955)



e. e. cummings

(1894-1962)

FOREWARD (1926)

On the assumption that my technique is either complicated or original or both, the publishers have politely requested me to write an introduction to this book.

At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz., "Would you hit a woman with a child?--No, I'd hither with a brick." Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.

If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little--somebody who is obsessed by Making. Like all obsessions, the Making obsession has disadvantages; for instance, my only interest in making money would be to make it. Fortunately, however, I should prefer to make almost anything else, including locomotives and roses. It is with roses and locomotives (not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls) that my "poems" are competing.

They are also competing with each other, with elephants, and with El Greco.

Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in a purely irresistible truth (to be found, in abbreviated costume, upon the title page of the present volume).



### INTRODUCTION (1938)

The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople.

--it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootofminusone. You and I are human beings; most people are snobs.

Take the matter of being born. What does being born mean to mostpeople? Catastrophe unmitigated. Socialrevolution. The cultured aristocrat yanked out of his hyperexclusively ultravoluptuous superpalazzo, and dumped into an incredibly vulgar detentioncamp swarming with every conceivable species of undesirable organism. Mostpeople fancy a guaranteed birthproof safetysuit of nondestructible selfishness. If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying--

you and I are not snobs. We an never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves. You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming. Life, for eternal us, is now; and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything catastrophic included.

Life, for mostpeople, simply isn't. Take the socalled standardofliving. What do mostpeople mean by "living"? They don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science, in its finite but unbounded wisdom, has succeeded in selling their wives. If science could fail, a mountain's a mammal. Mostpeople's wives can spot a genuine elusion of embryonic omnipotence immediately and will accept no substitutes.

--luckily for us, a mountain is a mammal. The plusorminus movie to end moving, the strictly scientific parlourgame of real unreality, the tyranny conceived in misconception and dedicated to the proposition that every man is a woman and any woman is a king, hasn't a wheel to stand on. What their most synthetic not to mention transparent majesty, mrsandmr collective foetus, would improbably call a ghost is walking. He isn't an undream or anaesthetized impersons, or a cosmic comfortstation, or a transcendently sterilized lookiesoundiefeelietastiesmellie. He is a healthily complex, a naturally homogenous, citizen of immortality. The now of his each pitying free imperfect gesture, his any birth or breathing, insults perfected inframortally millenniums of slavishness. He is a little more than everything, he is democracy; he is alive: he is ourselves.

Miracles are to come. With you I leave a remembrance of miracles: they are by somebody who can love and who shall be continually reborn, a human being; somebody who said to those near him, when his fingers would not hold a brush "tie it into my hand"--

nothing proving or sick or partial. Nothing false, nothing difficult or easy or small or colossal. Nothing ordinary or extraordinary, nothing emptied or filled, real or unreal; nothing feeble and known or clumsy and guessed. Everywhere tints childrening, innocent spontaneous, true. Nowhere possibly what flesh and impossibly such a garden, but actually flowers which breasts are among the very mouths of light. Nothing believed or doubted; brain over heart, surface: nowhere hating or to fear; shadow, mind without soul. Only how measureless cool flames of making; only each other building always distinct selves of mutual entirely opening; only alive. Never the murdered finalities of wherwhen and yesno, impotent nongames or wrongright and rightwrong; never to gain or pause, never the soft adventure of undoom, greedy anguished and cringing ecstasies of inexistence; never to rest and never to have: only to grow.

Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.



A POET'S ADVICE (1955)

A poet is somebody who feels, and who expresses his feeling 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 an 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're 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.

e. e. cummings

[For clarity online, conventional spacing has been restored after internal punctuation. Cummings' omission of spaces after commas, colons, and semicolons appear to be typos and are a merely typographical device with no evident meaning except defiance of convention. Such devices often work in his poems, but here, jamming words and sentence parts closer together contradicts his theme of individualism with an effect like bumping into fellow passengers in a crowded subway train. M.H.]