

e.e. cummings at the café olé
(after Michael Ondaatje's
Bessie Smith at Roy Thompson Hall)

yesterday he dis(proved) the history books by sitting in the corner of my usual café. . .

People only noticed him after his first drink when he became a bit looser and started to sketch the ceiling fan(displayed as a large circle)on the back of his napkin.

For a while we just sat and watched. *Edward Estlin, what are you doing in Ontario?*

No one dared to interrupt until a young lady walked up and said "are you. . .?" and he was. After that, a man sitting in a booth nearby—fortyish, business suit—called out "tell us a poem," so he did. His voice was in good shape, I thought, considering there had been rumours he was dead. He recited "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," this occurring somewhere near Cambridge(Ontario)and because perhaps he thought we needed reminding. Then he was asked for another so he started into "pity this busy monster,manunkind" but at some point(and I couldn't tell exactly when he did this)he moved into "my sweet old etcetera/aunt lucy during the recent/war," and then rounded out the set with a little touch of "next to of course god america I" and took a rapid drink of water himself before giving the last line. The house went crazy.

People started shouting out requests: parts of lines, titles of their favourite poems. "in Just-/spring," "Buffalo Bill's," "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond." He did them all.

By this point word had spread that something was happening and people were coming in off the sidewalk to hear him speak. There weren't enough chairs so they had to stand up in the aisles. He seemed to be getting excited now and started into a few poems I didn't recognize, giving us tantalizing fragments before he moved on to recite other works that weren't even his, poems that had been written by other people long after he passed away in 1962.

We listened in all for three quarters of an hour. Drinks were forgotten and grew cold. He started asking us how long we'd all been coming to the café, and then about the weather here in Canada, and finally about whether or not we knew the best way to get to the other Cambridge(the familiar one, the one in Massachusetts)which was the place he had come back in the first place to go and visit.

Eventually he stood and asked for his bill. We told him it was free of charge if he would leave us another poem. He said he had a little something he was working on, but before we could find some paper for him to write it down on a Greyhound bus pulled up outside the window and he said he had to go. I asked him when his next collection of poems would be coming out. He only shrugged and laughed.

When he left, his cookie crumbs were arranged in the shape of a god.

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