

somewhere i have never travelled – e.e. cummings

Summary

This poem was written for his second wife, Annie Barton. He is explaining his feelings towards her, and the power that she has over him. He explains that she has control over him that no one else has. She has the ability to make him open up emotionally even though he had built up emotional walls in the past.

He also explains that he does not know how she does this, but appreciates this, and repeatedly ruminates on her beauty. In the end, he gives her credit for the changes in his life. The poem demonstrates the way that the two people care for and respond to one another.

Structure

The poetry of Cummings is characterized by the lack of capital letters, even in the spelling of his own name. He wrote in this unconventional style. The lack of capitalization, specifically in the pronoun "I," also supports the poet's extreme devotion to his lover.

The poem is arranged in quatrains without any capitalization and odd punctuation.

Stanza 1

Lines 1-2

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond / any experience, your eyes have their silence:

The words, "somewhere" and "travelled" imply that the speaker is about to tell the reader about a journey that he has undertaken.

gladly – this journey is a happy one

beyond any experience – he has not experienced this before.

your eyes have their silence – the speaker is talking to another person, who has silent eyes.

Personification: Eyes are regarded as a window into a person's soul. *Silence* implies that he cannot read the emotions conveyed by this person's eyes.

The discussion of the person's eyes, along with the use of the word "*gladly*," gives readers the first indication that this journey is a figurative one and the woman's eyes are the means by which the speaker makes this journey.

Lines 3-4

in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me, / or which i cannot touch because they are too near

most frail gesture – even the slightest (*frail*) movement of her hands, body or head had some meaning or conveyed an idea to him . . .

things which enclose me – . . . they are so powerful that he feels captivated by them

cannot touch because they are too near – At the same time, although these feelings surround him, he cannot touch them, because they are so all-consuming that they have become a deeply ingrained part of him.

Stanza 2

Lines 5-6

your slightest look easily will unclose me/ though i have closed myself as fingers,

The speaker emphasises the power of the woman's glance in these two lines. The speaker notes that the woman can easily open him (*unclose*), even though he has "*closed myself as fingers*."

Slightest – does not require a lot of effort to get him to express his inner feelings. The speaker's love for this woman has opened him up, and he enjoys these new emotions.

Lines 7-8

you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

Personification / Simile – In these lines, the speaker elaborates on how she gets him to express his feelings, by using the analogy of a rose opening up in spring. He is referring to spring as a person, who is physically opening up the rose, *petal by petal*. Similarly, she is able to get him to open up, bit by bit. This shows that she easily understands him.

mysteriously – Nobody can explain how a rose opens up in spring. Similarly, he cannot explain why she has such an effect on him.

rose – a symbol of love. This is apt as he is talking about his deep love for her.

Stanza 3

Lines 9-12

*or if your wish be to close me, i and / my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines / the snow carefully everywhere descending;*

This stanza continues the image of the rose. He uses another simile to compare the way his lover can close him down emotionally: to the way a rose dies in winter.

It highlights his unconditional love and her influence over him. The speaker is under her complete control, to the point that she has power over his life and his death.

to close me/ my life will shut very beautifully – to die (literally). Figuratively: the closing of emotions. Closing himself/not sharing his inner thoughts will be like death.

While death is generally considered negatively, in the context of this poem, the speaker describes it as *beautiful*, equating his hypothetical death with the impending death of a flower.

beautifully – the poem retains the positive mood that it established with the word "gladly" in the first stanza.

Personification – He is personifying the flower and comparing it to his heart, saying that when the flower detects snow is starting to fall, it closes off and dies.

carefully – Just as everything is covered by snow, this emphasises that nothing can escape death.

Since the lifecycle of the rose is eternal (the flower will experience a rebirth again in spring) its death is not tragic. By equating his own death/ closing of emotions at his lover's hands with the rose's death, he is emphasising that this will not be tragic.

Stanza 4

Lines 13-14

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals / the power of your intense fragility: whose texture

The speaker refers to the metaphysical quality of the woman's power.

Nothing . . . to perceive in this world equals – emphasises there is no greater power on earth
perceive – refers to what people can see/understand. He acknowledges that there is greater power that we cannot see/understand.

your intense fragility – Paradox & irony: weakness vs. godly power. Females are generally regarded as being weak, but her femininity, is so powerful that it transcends the physical world.

Lines 14-16

compels me with the colour of its countries, / rendering death and forever with each breathing

The speaker examines the quality (*texture*) of her femininity. He compares these qualities to important features of countries. Just as a person is attracted (*compels*) by certain features of a country, so too is he drawn towards her qualities. He is fascinated by her femininity

the colour of its countries – a country is made up of many different aspects/components. Different countries have different attractions. The speaker does not literally mean that the woman's intense femininity is composed of countries, in a geographic sense. Rather, he is emphasising that her feminine powers occupy a metaphysical world of their own.

rendering death and forever with each breathing – the speaker builds on the idea of the previous stanza, emphasising the power that the woman has over his life and death.

Stanza 5

Lines 17-19

(i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens; only something in me understands / the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)

i do not know what it is about you that closes / and opens – Extended metaphor: he cannot understand the mysterious power she has over him. As much as he examines the specific aspects of the woman's femininity, the speaker is unsure about how the woman has such a power over him, how she can open him or close him, how she can control his life and death so easily.

only something in me understands – he acknowledges that he will never completely understand her power.

the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses – Personification emphasises her power. She does not have to talk. The emotions conveyed by her eyes are extremely powerful. Previously, the speaker equated his lover's power to the power that spring has to open a rose. Now, he is saying that his lover's power is even stronger than this natural, seasonal power.

Line 20

nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

Personification – the speaker emphasises the idea that this woman's power is unmatched by anything in nature. The speaker is personifying the rain, and imagining it as the "hands" that spring uses to open roses. A raindrop will seep through the soil to get to the seed which it enables to grow and open up. While this is an impressive natural power, the speaker says that his lover is even more impressive: she has a much deeper effect than rain. The rain is not as fragile or as beautiful as her hands which have the power to open up his heart.

The parentheses refer to ideas that he has already mentioned. By repeating them, he is reflecting on her intense power.

THEMES

- The speaker's intense love for and devotion to his lover
- The tremendous power she exercises over him
- The fragility of the woman he loves
- The mystery and beauty of love.

tone

- Sincerity
- Passion
- devotion
- Soulful/Captivated

MOOD

Hopeful/mysterious

QUESTIONS

1. Explore the metaphor of travel as it is used in the poem, and evaluate its effectiveness. (3)
2. Discuss the effectiveness of the imagery in 'though i have closed myself as fingers' (l 6). (3)
3. What does the speaker compare himself to and why is this an effective comparison?
Lines 5-8 (3)
4. Discuss the effect of the seasonal comparison being extended into the third quatrain? (3)
5. How does this give a different perspective on love? (3)
6. Discuss the effectiveness of the following imagery in the context of the poem:
 - *your eyes have their silence* (3)
 - *you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens* (3)
 - *nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands* (3)
7. Part of Cummings's message in the poem is how difficult it is for humans to perceive or comprehend God with our limited senses: 'nothing which we are to perceive in this world' can do justice to God. How does Cummings' poetry help us towards a discernment of God, as he sees Him? (3)