

## Thoughts on Norton's Woods

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While on the flight to Boston, I took Mike's suggestion and reread the second nonlecture. I gravitated to the passage on Norton's Woods, reading it several times and marveling how the seed for Cummings' lifelong exploration and celebration of Nature began "only a butterfly's glide from [his] home." He describes Norton's Woods as existing within a "mythical domain of semiwilderness"—within a "magical realm of Between." He continues, "Here, as a very little child, I first encountered that mystery who is Nature; here my enormous smallness entered Her illimitable being; and here someone actually infinite or impossibly alive—someone who might almost (but not quite) have been myself—wonderingly wandered the mortally immortal complexities of Her beyond imagining imagination" (32).

As we retraced the short walk from Cummings' home to the woods, I imagined how chasing butterflies led Cummings, at times, into the semi-wilderness. But when we arrived, I was, initially, underwhelmed. I expected the trees to be much older. They were young, and most of the trees' trunks and branches followed simple patterns. They may very well be trees planted within the last sixty years. They just didn't look old enough to be the same ones Cummings wandered through as a child. Regardless, it was a very ordinary plot of land with grasses, dirt, sparsely distributed trees, and a few flowers here and there. Nothing spectacular.

Etienne spotted a butterfly, though, which drew me back to Cummings' nonlecture and the following reminder. Cummings' illimitable gift of poetry reminds us that what appears to be ordinary (a tree, a leaf, a grasshopper, a butterfly, a snowflake, rain, mud, Norton's Woods) is a mystery. Each world is full of infinite worlds. To be alive, one must reawaken the imagination (and one's language) in order to enter Nature's "illimitable being."

I had wanted a spectacle. I should have wanted to *look*.

In this light, Norton's Woods is a "magical realm." It is a place where Cummings had a profound identification with the earth amidst a city. No matter how familiar a tree or a blade of grass or a butterfly may be, there is something miraculous in its ability to grow, or to flutter "plashless," as Dickinson described, through the humid summer air (359). It makes sense that Cummings identified with what could be seen as an "ordinary" semi-wilderness. It didn't matter. The "eyes of [his] eyes" were open (CP 663).

## Works Cited

Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1991. Print.

—. *i: six nonlectures*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Ralph William Franklin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.



**Figure 1:** “leaping greenly spirits of trees” (CP 663) in Norton’s Woods (photo: Bernard F. Stehle)