



MIKE DISCIULLO/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Could South Drive resident Marion Drake know who scribbled the mysterious verse?

Life intersects verse on the corner of Villard

By Nancy Angiello

I had just moved from Manhattan to Hastings and was hoping my life would be changed by the beauty of the village. But I never dreamed it would be pure poetry.

It happened like this: Like many Hastings people, I like to walk, even up crazy, steep Villard Avenue, on a hot day with a backpack full of groceries. Slowly climbing home, panting, I stopped under a shady tree at the southwest corner of Terrace Drive. There at my sneakers was a faint, faded inscription in a tiny corner of the sidewalk — something written probably many years ago, in a squiggly hand into the concrete:

as yes is to if, love is to yes

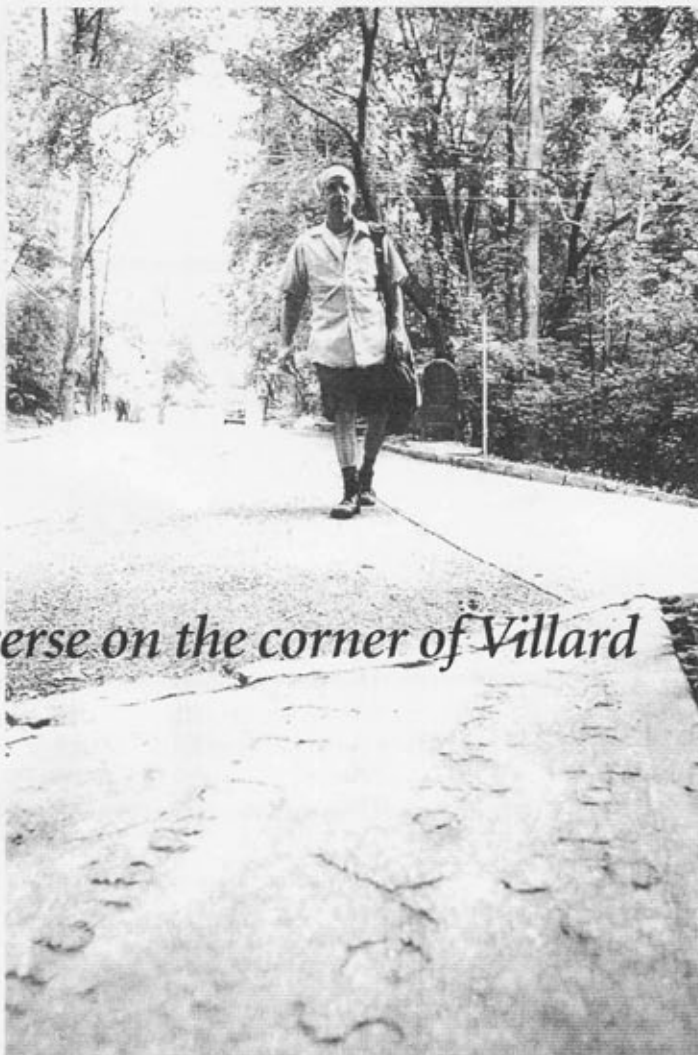
E.E. Cummings

Whaaaaa? Sidewalk poetry?

In pavement you expect inscriptions like "Joe was here" or a clichéd old heart with initials and arrows going through it. But no. This is Hastings. I looked again. Suddenly I found myself memorizing the words, reciting them aloud. You can do that around here and no one will notice.

"as yes is to if, love is to yes" ... I'm getting all tingly. Why do I feel so tingly? Has anyone else seen this, and did they feel this way too? Or was it just too hot that day?

Maybe it was spring in the air adding my brain, but those few words really got to me. The whole thing seemed full of love, but restrained, mysterious, hopeful. Maybe it was the dichotomy: the old con-



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To mailman Vinnie Cusmano the line speaks of dreams and permanence.

crete — banal, kind of ugly — and the beautiful inscription — worn, aged with time, romantic.

Off I went up that hill — this is one heck of a slope here — but I kind of leapt along. Maybe the person wrote the line here to help you on your way? It did give me a charge. OK, I know — I just moved here and I'm a little swoony. But still. Right foot, left foot ... "as yes is to if" ... right foot, left foot ... "love is to yes." It was a mantra. No, some secret message that would be revealed in time, just fixed there so unobtrusively and folkish, like some ancient cave art.

What kind of person would write a line of E.E. Cummings poetry to wet sidewalk cement? And what does it mean?

Mysterious sidewalk poetry-lover, who are you?

Day 2: Finding the poem

Now, this person left us just a line of a poem — what about the rest? After an entire day of reading Cummings' collected works, I finally found the poem. It would have been a lot easier if the poetry-lover had used a first line since that is how Cummings' poems, most untitled, are indexed. But no. This mystery writer was going to make me work.

It is a poem from a 1944 collection. The first stanza begins:

"nothing false and possible is love
(who's imagined, therefore limitless)
love's to giving as to keeping's give;
as yes is to if, love is to yes"

There it is. Now to find out why the poem affects people, and the search for the hit-and-run writer.

Day 3: Getting a grip on the line

"as yes is to if" — well, it seems to mean: as absolute certainty is to doubt. And then, "love is to yes" could be the limitless possibility of hope and love is to absolute certainty. Maybe? It sure is powerful. If only I knew why.

Day 4: Imagining who did it

A picture starts to form in your mind after you first see the quote. And you start to wonder:

When and why did the masked poetry-lover strike?

I think it was a young girl, around 16 years old, reading sophisticated poetry for the first time and finding it relevant to her life. She was in love — with life, with words, with romance, with the hope of a first serious crush. She was out wandering the streets, and came across some wet concrete. She stooped, looked around, and wrote with a broken-off pencil from her pocket ... then turned and ran off. No one will ever know who did this, not even the object of her romantic dreams ...

Surely some of the many walkers to and from the village — like the man who stops to smell the flowers on his way to the train — have seen this little line, smiled and wondered about it? Perhaps it has made others appreciate the little things in life, those little things sometimes right under our feet?

Day 5: A professor's help

I decided to call Jean D'Costa, my writing and literature professor at Hamilton College. An emeritus professor, she surely could shed some light on the Cummings' phrase.

ME: Jean, help! What does this line mean to you?

JEAN: The "yes" here is extremely powerful. In fact, "yes" goes back to Old English. Its original written form is "giese" and the meaning is "let it be so." That is why the word is so powerful in this line. It is both solemn and courteous, and in this poem it is sacred.

ME: Why do you think this person inscribed this particular line?

JEAN: That line is the most powerful in the whole poem; it spoke to something in her life. She wanted to pass it on to other lives, to people who never would read Cummings. The fact that the writer is mysterious is even more wonderful, and now it is part of the cultural and artistic character of the village. It should be landmarked.

Day 6: Polling the neighbors

I wanted to find out what my new

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friends in the neighborhood thought of the poetry. Had they noticed? Were they moved? Did they care?

ME: Who do you think did it and why?

ANNA CHRISTAKE CORNWELL [Circle Drive resident for 31 years; likes to walk; literary type; observant; curious]: I think it was a man — possibly the person who resurfaced the sidewalk. And when the cement was still wet, he had some sort of poetic inclination. Obviously this was a temptation, a territory that needed to be enhanced by verse. He may have wanted to leave something for posterity — for people to bend down and look very closely to the earth, just as gardeners do. It's like someone planted a seed, and now it's flowering in people's minds.

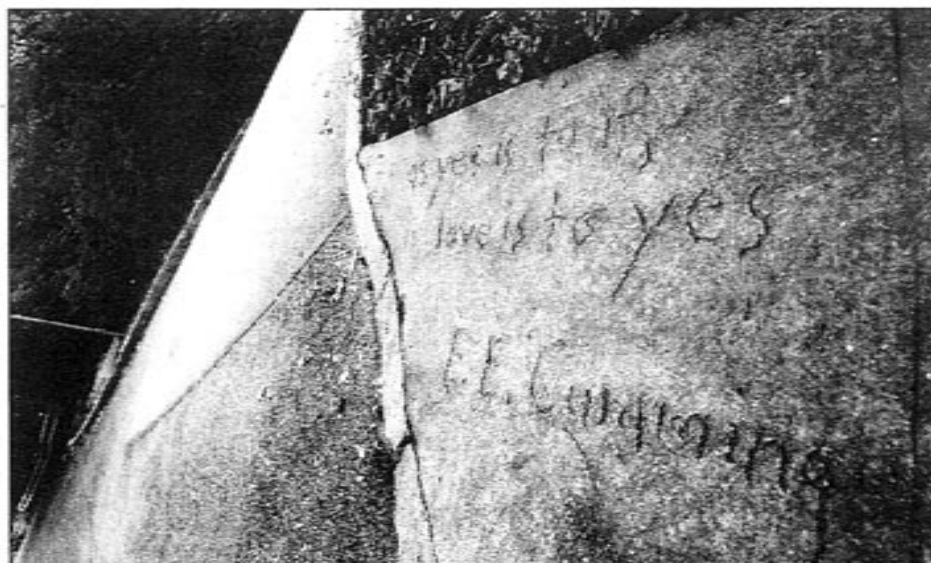
ME: What does the line of poetry mean to you?

ANNA: The first half of the line sets the stage — certainty, possibility and doubt. And then the definite "yes," coupled with "love," also implies and encompasses possibility, attraction, as well as doubt.

VINNIE CUSMANO [aka Vinnie the Mailman. His beat has been Riverview Manor for the last two and a half years. He makes contact with our mailbox like a sprinter passing a baton in the 440 relay. Would he notice and wonder about the mystery line of poetry? Since he always takes time to smile and say "hello," I asked and we sat on my front steps to chat.]

ME: What does this line of poetry mean to you?

VINNIE: The quote itself speaks of dreams and permanence, dreams and foundation. The two "yes's" are commitment. "If" and "love" speak of



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Ten years ago, a mysterious poet scribbled a line of E.E. Cummings into the corner of Villard Avenue and Terrace Drive.

dreams and yearnings.

ME: Who do you think did it?

VINNIE: I get a picture of a young romantic. I would have to say a young man, either romantically involved or looking to become romantically involved. Why a man? Because it's done in concrete. That's a male thing — the urge to inscribe something permanently. A girl would write a letter or in her diary.

ME: How does it make you feel?

VINNIE: It's one thing to look at plants and flowers when you walk, but to see that someone took the time to put something that beautiful [shakes his head]. When I first discovered it, I thought about it for the rest of the day and when I got home I read about Cummings and want to learn more.

[OK, now we have the makings of a true literary salon. It meets in the afternoon on my front stoop.]

Day 7: The hunt begins

Perhaps she lived near where she struck. Perhaps those who live near the inscription have clues. My husband (I have enlisted him as Junior Detective) and I decide to bike around South and Terrace, looking for clues, and think about ringing some doorbells. Idea rejected — I'm too shy. Junior Detective does note the addresses of the three properties in direct proximity to the quote. Who knows what untold stories lurk behind those closed doors?

Day 8: A breakthrough

Junior Detective has made a major crack in the case (now I'll have to promote him). Via the Web, he's scored the names and telephone numbers of the three residents I seek for questioning.

Calls are made:

ME: Hello, you don't know me, but ... do you know anything about a poetic

piece of concrete sidewalk near your house?

Day 9: A possible suspect

Rrrring! It's Marion Drake. Her South Drive back yard is nearest the mystery sidewalk.

MRS. DRAKE: Uh, huhhhh! [she says knowingly].

ME: Do you have any idea whose work this is?

MRS. DRAKE: I have no idea. We never did find out who did it.

ME: Really?

MRS. DRAKE: Well, actually, there was a rumor — and we narrowed it down to the older Riley girl; she lived on Circle Drive, but I can't remember her name. She was sort of artsy.

ME: Really!

MRS. DRAKE: But they moved away a long time ago. [Damn!] It happened in the middle of the night. You know teenagers! [She laughs]. She was probably in high school when she did it — oh, maybe a number of years ago. Cena Hampden [her former neighbor] heard something about it from her daughter Becky, so you should ask her.

ME: What did you think when you saw the line of poetry in the sidewalk? Did you think it was romantic and mysterious?

MRS. DRAKE: No, it was a non-event, more like "who did that?" But we never did discover who did it. She never came forward [laughs again]. The funny thing is, I'll be in my kitchen where I can see out to the sidewalk there, and every once in a while someone, or a couple, will be out walking. And they'll stop and stare for a while. And I will know exactly why they are stopped there ... Come by and say "hello" and let me know what happens! I'd love to know who did it after all these years.

...To be continued next week

The mysterious sidewalk poetry of Villard Avenue, Part II

By Nancy Angiello

When I last left off, the mystery of the sidewalk poetry was still unsolved. The line of E.E. Cummings poetry inscribed on the corner of Villard Avenue and Terrace Drive — "as yes is to if, love is to yes" — still continued to haunt me. I had to find out who wrote this, and why. After nine days of searching for clues, I had one possible suspect. According to Marion Drake (who lives nearest to the poetry inscription), it might have been "the older Riley girl," formerly of Circle Drive. The hunt for the hand behind this enigmatic and exquisitely romantic pavement poetry continues ... mysterious poetry-lover, will you be found?

Day 10: Frustration, then optimism

How will I find the Riley girl, the older Riley girl whose name I don't know? How can I be a detective of any stature, going around asking for information on "the older Riley girl"?

Relief.

Cena Hampden, formerly of South Drive, the very one whose daughter may know something — like where this Riley girl is now — is tracked down.

MRS. HAMPDEN: Well, I don't know who did it, but my daughter Becky could tell you. I do remember her talking about it at the time.

ME: Do you think it was the older Riley girl, or was it possibly Becky?

MRS. HAMPDEN: I can't remember the details ...

ME: What do you think of this act of poetic sidewalk art?

MRS. HAMPDEN: Well, Becky and her friends were a pretty unique group of kids at that time. They did pretty special things ...

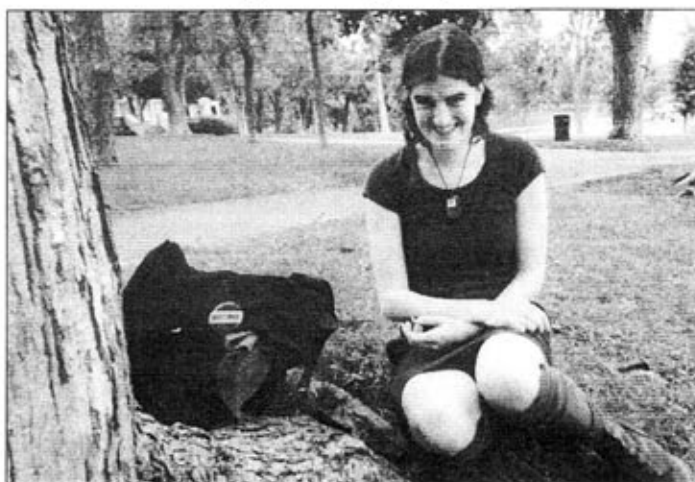
[Ah-hah! Family pride about the pavement poetry! Am I going to find that the masked poetry-lover is indeed one of these "unique kids"?]

Day 11: The fateful phone call

[I am a bit nervous as I dial Becky's number. Will she reveal the details I desire? Will she even talk to me? After all, I am calling out of the blue. Indeed, she sounds a bit suspicious at first. What is a total stranger from her old hometown calling about? But, in classic Hastings form, Becky turns out to be open and talkative.]

ME: So, I just got off the phone with your mother — maybe you can give me some tips about this pavement writing?

REBECCA HAMPDEN: Well, I didn't



Does Becky Hampden know the identity of the mysterious poetry-lover?

do it, but I do know who did, and it was not Gillian Riley [so that's her first name!].

ME: Really! It was not you, or the older Riley girl! [I now barely dare to breathe. After all this time, will the poet finally be revealed?]

REBECCA: It was ...
[And then she tells me the name. I cannot tell you right now, not until I find the mystery poetry-inscriber myself. But I can tell you it was not a young girl, so there goes my theory.]

ME: So it wasn't a girl, but a high school boy? I pictured a teenage girl in love!

REBECCA: No, more like a young man in love. I wasn't there, but I heard he did it. I remember exactly when — it was the fall of 1990. We were friends at the time; we were fighting together to save Hillside Woods. We're still friends.

[Ah, so this fall marks the 10th anniversary of the concrete poetry inscription. How auspicious, as the days get closer to finding the hand who left it there. Now I savor the heady moment before dialing the numbers that will finally lead me to the poetry lover of Villard Avenue.]

Days 12, 13, 14: A love story uncovered

Getting a hold of the "young man in love" of 10 years ago proves tricky. He lives Vermont and is rarely home, so the ghostly air about him continues. I have mixed feelings about calling him. I think he should remain a mystery. That is what makes this inscription left by that faint hand so appealing — that is was anonymous. Without the mystery, will our imaginations be less active? Isn't it a more

profound experience just to wonder about the line of poetry and who put it there?

How can I flush him out, this sensitive soul? Shouldn't I leave him in peace?

The thing is, look how the anonymity made total strangers and new neighbors really talk and share ideas. Totally unrelated people, all wondering, talking about words, poetry, philosophy, dreams, love, yearning and romance. Now, when was the last time I talked to a neighbor — especially one I just met — or my mailman about these things? I think never. This little act of poetic scrawl on a mundane old sidewalk has had a lasting impact. I want all those people who love to walk up and down this curvy, challenging hill to still wonder, and smile, and let their imaginations wander ...

Ahh, but I can't resist. After all, Becky has made it so easy for me. I simply must call the man who did this, who brought so many people a sense of life's small and odd wonders.

Also, he deserves recognition, and after talking with him, it seems he appreciates it ("Thank you for caring about this," he says, "thank you for tracking me down"). I thought he'd be guarded (and, of course, mysterious), and simply cut me off with a brusque "no comment"! After all, he's remained anonymous all these years — isn't that what he wanted?

But no — in what I now find is true Hastings fashion — he likes to talk.

ME: How does it feel to be the man behind it all?

STEPHEN CALLAHAN [The troubadour of Hastings, formerly of Summit

Drive, then Ridge Street. A "thorough Hastings person," as he says, "roaming the streets to an extraordinary degree." Now lives in Vermont; a night watchman; poet; author of a book-in-progress of poems; of course, a voracious reader and lover of poetry]. Well, I was not aware of the stir it caused, but I'm glad it's living on [he chuckles].

ME: Do you remember what you wrote?

STEPHEN: Ah yes — "as yes is to if, love is to yes"

ME: Why did you write this into the wet concrete 10 years ago?

STEPHEN: I lived up there for many years, and I would always haunt Riverview Manor. I would walk everywhere. I always loved poetry, especially E.E. Cummings and that particular line. I discovered the poem a long time ago. That little phrase always seemed to me very powerful.



Cena Hampden thinks her daughter knows the secret.

I was alone at the time, either the afternoon or early evening, when I came across that patch of pavement. The concrete was still wet; I think it was covered in burlap. So I took a little twig and ...

ME: Why the Cummings line?

STEPHEN: It was one of my favorite phrases of his, and I thought other people would enjoy it. I think that when I looked at the small, triangular space there it jumped into my head as one of the most potent phrases — this tiny phrase which can involve the mind and inspire a lot of exegesis explanation.

ME: I must ask you: Were you in love?

STEPHEN: Well, it happened by pure chance that later I did fall in love with a girl who lived right near there. At the time I don't think I knew her too well. She did notice it, too, on her own — so it was kind of like a communica-

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tion before we met. I've never told anyone but her that I wrote the line, so it's remained pretty much a secret.

ME: Did you ever see anyone stop and stare at your inscription?

STEPHEN: No, but I, of course, hoped impressionable people — young people especially — would be inspired by poetry. I would look at it on occasion, though, and was happy to see it getting a little darker — showing the passing of time. It was very nice to see that.

ME: And finally, since neighbors have thought about what the line means to them, what does it mean to you?

STEPHEN: "as yes is to if, love is to yes" — there's a logic to it. You think about it, your mind can almost, but not quite, grasp it. It's always a little bit

beyond reason — which is something poetry can do.

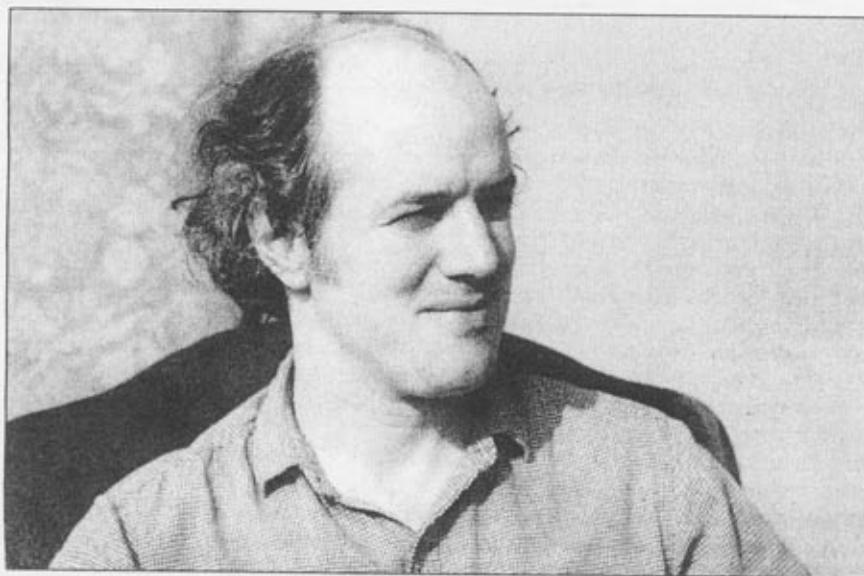
At the same time, it's a mathematical formula which points to the exponential value of love; the line is so powerful it almost gets into another dimension. And that's part of the illogic: it's beyond logic — that's why you can't stop thinking about it.

And from "yes" to "if" is a tremendous leap — "if" is tentative, "yes" is absolutely affirmative. To leap even further from that you have from "love" to "yes." It's a chain, which ends up multiplying the "if" and "yes" ... to finally "love."

It boggles the mind in a wonderful way.

Yes, that's it exactly.

And that's how I find my life here in Hastings so far — a little more poetic, a little richer than normal, all from two lines of lovely words left like flowers along the dusty, mossy pavement of Villard Avenue.



Finally revealed! Stephen Callahan, the sidewalk poetry-lover of Villard Avenue.