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Encounter with a Cowboy

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**Encounter with a cowboy**

My sister shows me an e.e. Cummings poem:  
**buffalo bill’s defunct**—

what can it mean?

Do you understand? she asks.  
I don’t.

It means that no one is better than anyone else.  
It means that when we’re dead, we’re all the same.

All I know about poetry  
I know from Golden Books—

call I know about death  
I know from church, and  
from the time my mother furthered my education  
by bringing me to a funeral  
home to see a dead body.

The man in the casket had a green beard.  
I remember saying that it was green.  
I told my friends at school. I remember saying it again  
and again and again until  
I could no longer remember the beard,  
just my word for it—green.

That’s what I know about death.

Now do you understand?  
We’re all the same.  
Isn’t that wonderful?

I ask, Why did the man in the poem shoot sparrows?  
She can’t explain.

Everything I know  
about killing animals I learned  
the summer I went to Christian Heights Bible Camp in Little Valley, New York.
I was enamoured of a pond until
a local came with
a gun. A counsellor said later
the man was deranged. The man didn’t say
anything himself, just
shot all the frogs.

Poppity poppity pop.

I watched them die—
misplaced stones in brown water,
their lifeless promise as green
as a beard.

Jesus I cried.

I ask my sister if defunct
means deranged. I am afraid of
what the poem means,
afraid of being the same
as buffalo bill,
a defunct cowboy who shot sparrows,
who is the same for being dead
as a man who shot frogs.