

# The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens

By Paul Mariani

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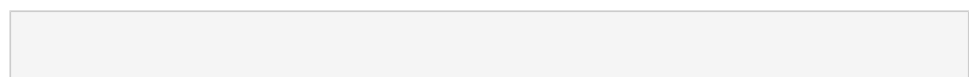
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A perceptive, enlightening biography of one the most important American poets of the twentieth century—Wallace Stevens—as seen through his lifelong quest to find and describe the sublime in the human experience.

Wallace Stevens lived a richly imaginative life that found expression in his poetry. His philosophical questioning, spiritual depth, and brilliantly inventive use of language would be profound influences on poets as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. *The Whole Harmonium* presents Stevens within the living context of his times, as well as the creator of a poetry which has had a profound and lasting impact on the modern imagination itself.

Stevens established his career as an executive even as he wrote his poetry, becoming a vice president with an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. His first and most influential book, *Harmonium*, was not published until he was forty-four years old. In these poems, Stevens drew on his interest in and understanding of modernism. Over time he became acquainted with the most accomplished of his contemporaries, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams among them, but his personal style remained unique. He endured an increasingly unhappy marriage, losing himself by writing poetry in his study. Yet he had a witty, comic, and Dionysian side to his personality, including long fishing (and drinking) trips to Florida with his pals and a fascination with the sun-drenched tropics.

People generally know two things about Wallace Stevens: that he is a “difficult” poet and that he was an insurance executive for most of his life. Stevens may be challenging to understand, but he is also greatly rewarding to read. Now, sixty years after Stevens’s death, biographer and poet Paul Mariani shows how over the course of his life, Stevens sought out the ineffable and spiritual in human existence in his search for the sublime.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Incandescent. . . . A redefining biography of a major poet whose reputation continues to ascend." (*Booklist* (starred review))

"Paul Mariani's excellent new book, *The Whole Harmonium*, is a thrilling story of a mind. . . . He has a prehensile feel for the roots and branches of literary modernism, exemplary taste in what he chooses to quote, and a real gift for exegesis, unpacking poems in language that is nearly as eloquent as the poet's, and as clear as faithfulness allows. . . . Superb." (Peter Schjeldahl *The New Yorker*)

"Those of us who consider Wallace Stevens among the gods of modern poetry — the equal of Yeats, Eliot, and Frost — have waited impatiently for decades for a good biography of this elusive, compelling figure. Paul Mariani has performed a small miracle here, drawing together the life and work in seamless harmony, digging into the interior life of the man who defines the word 'imagination' for our time. The great enterprise of Stevens, whose language was always his own, like nothing else in this world, has been ably served by this biography. It's a moving and deeply informative book, one that brings us close to the flame itself, that mind on fire." (Jay Parini, author of *Robert Frost: A Life and Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal*)

"In this his amazing *sixth* major biography, Paul Mariani illustrates again his mastery of the form. Writing with breezy fluency, the sympathy of a fellow poet, and with the confident authority of a superb teacher, Mariani has captured the life of Wallace Stevens as no one has before." (Ron Hansen, author of *A Wild Surge of Guilty Passion: A Novel*)

"A consensus has grown around the proposition that Wallace Stevens is the modern American poet who has had the greatest and most lasting influence on the generations of poets that have followed. . . . *The Whole Harmonium*, Paul Mariani's excellent biography, is a welcome addition to the Stevens shelf." (David Lehman, editor, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, and series editor, *The Best American Poetry*)

"This life of Wallace Stevens cements poet and biographer Mariani's role as the James Boswell of our age. It is beautifully written; a compelling vision of one of the 20th-century's greatest and most enigmatic literary figures. . . . Mariani weaves skillfully many strands, creating a biography that is both deliciously readable and profoundly knowledgeable. . . . This is the Stevens biography for which poetry lovers have been waiting. . . . Brilliant." (*Library Journal* (starred review))

"What makes Mariani such a consummate biographer is his narrative skills combined with his ability to lucidly explicate complex poetry—a talent that comes from Mariani's own achievements as a lyric poet. Most special about Stevens is the vitality of his imagination, his genius to enrich the ordinary, 'the quotidian,' with metaphorical structures that enhance reality." (Robert Pack, author of *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought*)

"This book is [Mariani's] best, and it performs a valuable service. . . . Understanding Stevens seems to have been a lifelong work for Mariani, who was wise to wait until late in life to write this book." (Dan Chiasson *Harper's Magazine*)

"Mariani speculates on Stevens's sometimes difficult, contrary nature and on his lifelong search for meaning

and the sublime. . . . [A] finely wrought analysis." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Mariani ably balances a straightforward chronicle of events from his subject's life with an analysis of the poet's often difficult, inventive work. While the two can seem quite separate at times, Mariani manages to make connections that give a deeper understanding of the man and the poet. . . . Though it is hard to convey a life of the mind, Mariani's biography does justice to this cerebral, metaphysical poet and his enduring body of work." (Robert Weibezahl *BookPage*)

#### About the Author

Paul Mariani is the University Professor of English at Boston College. He is the author of eighteen books, including seven volumes of poetry and biographies of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Hart Crane, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and William Carlos Williams, which was a National Book Award finalist. His life of Hart Crane, *The Broken Tower*, was made into a feature-length film directed by and starring James Franco. He lives in western Massachusetts.

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The Whole Harmonium

## 7

### **The Eye of the Blackbird, 1916–1918**

What syllable are you seeking,

Vocalissimus,

In the distance of sleep?

Speak it.

"TO THE ROARING WIND," 1917

On late Saturday afternoon, March 18, 1916, his leather briefcase stuffed with insurance papers from the Hartford, Wallace Stevens, thirty-six, impeccably dressed in a three-piece blue business suit, sits in a Pullman coach alone. He pores over a sheaf of documents and letters of introduction, sipping a martini. It is snowing and it is going to snow over the Pennsylvania hills beyond Reading. He is headed west, and when he wakes tomorrow after a night's twisting and turning in his too-small bunk, he will be in Indiana, where the sun will dazzle and the air will feel positively spring-like. Then he will stop in Chicago and take a brisk walk, gulping in the fresh air along the edge of Lake Michigan before he boards, bound for St. Paul and Minneapolis, where the only two bright signs he will see as he travels through the Wisconsin countryside are billboards advertising Beechnut Bacon and Climax Plug, the Grand Old Chew. Ah, America!

When he arrives in St. Paul at ten that evening, he will hail a taxi to take him to the new million-dollar high-rise St. Paul Hotel, where he will take a long, hot bath, ridding himself of the grime from the smoke-belching engines, then get some rest before meeting with his clients at the Hartford's offices at Cushing, Dunn and Driscoll. Then he will be back on the Pullman, this time heading for Minneapolis, where he will stay at another high-rise hotel (with bath) and write Elsie to say he is going to have to be away for yet another week, though it will actually be closer to two before he gets back to New York, so that in the interim she may wish

to return to Reading with her mother if her mother tires of New York and wants to go home. He may even call on his uncle Jack, his father's brother here in St. Paul, whom he has not seen in years. But to business first. Water the plants, he reminds her. It is such domestic missives that make up much of his married world now.

Returning home through Chicago at the end of March, he takes a room at a top-notch hotel on the Empire Block. It's another new skyscraper near the Chicago Loop, and he invites his aunt Anna, his mother's youngest sister, and her husband, Harry, for a drink in the lobby, and even considers taking them up on their offer to visit, but won't, as there is a portrait of Manet by Fantin-Latour and a superior collection of Renoirs and Monets on loan at the Art Institute in Chicago, plus the old World's Fair grounds and the Lakefront to enjoy.

There's also an unexpected telegram from Jim Kearney, his boss, informing Stevens that he will have to stay over in the Windy City for two more days, as there are clients to see and papers to sign. He had hoped to finally meet Harriet Monroe, but that too will have to wait for another time. Then it's back to New York for a few hours before he's on the road once more. And then home again, calling Kreymborg to see how things are going with Others, which—like many of the little magazines—seems to be in financial trouble. Then it's off on business again, this time heading south. But at least it will be springtime down in the Carolinas, where he will enjoy miles and miles of dogwood and cherry blossoms, while young girls parade about the streets in white for Easter.

Six days later it's the twelve-story Mason, its roof-line sign proclaiming that here indeed is the "Finest Roof Garden in the South." He dabs his pen into the inkwell in the hotel's library to tell Elsie it's summer here, with hibiscus, acacias, periwinkles, and pansies everywhere and that the trees are already heavy with leaves. Then it's on to Florida. Another week of this, and he and Elsie can finally leave New York behind and head to their apartment in Hartford. In the meantime he takes out a small scrap of cerise paper and writes in that terrible scrawl of his a few lines celebrating the world around him:

The lilacs wither in the Carolinas.

Already the butterflies flutter above the cabins.

Already the new-born children interpret love

In the voices of their mothers.

Timeless mother,

How is it that your aspic nipples

For once vent honey?

• • •

THAT EASTER HE WAS in Biscayne Bay and had to imagine the parade making its way along New York's Fifth Avenue, even as in the park a church choir was singing, much like the one he remembered in Reading. Was there anything "more inane than an Easter carol," which, when he thought about it, was nothing more than "a religious perversion of the activity of Spring in our blood"? Why a man who would prefer "to roll around in the grass should be asked to dress as magnificently as possible and listen to a choir"

was a mystery to him, “except from the flagellant point of view,” he told Elsie.

The truth was that the theater of his mind seemed to dwell in a place more like hell these days. And that theater, like the theater of the war raging across the Atlantic, constituted a world of darkness and oscillating shadows, upon which a raw red sun revealed things as they were. Earlier he’d written a one-act play called *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* and sent it to *Poetry*, and had just learned that it had been chosen from among some eighty plays to win a prize of \$100 and publication in the July issue. What he had tried to do with his play, he told Monroe, was “create a poetic atmosphere with a minimum of narration.” It was the first thing like it he’d ever done, and he was “delighted with the result.”

“All you need, / To find poetry,” one of the Chinese characters in the play says in the opening lines, “is to look for it with a lantern.” But by the play’s close, the scholar of one candle has been replaced by another, who sees that the very sunrise is not one thing, but as many things as there are observers. Stevens wasn’t interested in a plot and character development, he told Monroe, for here—as in his poems—narrative and character development were at most secondary. The real point of the play came in the final sentence of the final speech, where reality was revealed as “many-faceted as the leaves of a forest reddened by first light.”

In the June issue of *Poetry*, Monroe would go so far as to define Stevens’s play as a “formative moment in our poetic drama,” which Stevens felt was over the top. The play, he told Monroe’s associate, Alice Corbin, was something “quite out of the question in the ordinary theatre.” Still, he did think “that in the hands of people of imagination and feeling, it might do very well.” He wanted to see it performed, but only if it were done “properly and sensitively,” though, in a practical sense, that would have to be left to those footing the bill.

Four years later, on Friday evening, February 13, 1920, the play would have its sole performance at the Provincetown Playhouse on Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. But by then its six characters would search in vain for their author, for, while Stevens was in New York that day, he did not go to see his play performed. “So much water has gone under the bridges since the thing was written,” he told Monroe, “that I have not the curiosity even to read it at this late day,” and that was the “truth, not pose.” Thirty-five years after he’d written the play, he told a composer interested in turning it into a musical composition that he’d long since given up writing plays because he cared much more for the elegiac than he did the dramatic.

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BY LATE MAY 1916 he and Elsie were settled in Hartford at the Highland Court Hotel at 38-40 Windsor Avenue, two and a half miles north of Stevens’s office on Trumbull Street. The Highland was a five-story brick building with 250 apartments, sported a dining room, lobby, parlor, kitchen, barber shop, and servants’ quarters, and advertized itself as “an Hotel for Homelovers with the Atmosphere of an English Inn and the Convenience and Comfort of an American Home of the Best Class.” For years to come Elsie would have to live alone in Hartford much as she had in Manhattan while her husband traveled. Still, Hartford for her was infinitely better than New York. Just a week into their stay at the Highland, Stevens wrote Ferdinand Reyher that he already missed New York “abominably,” though “Mrs. Stevens, with murderous indifference, pretends that Hartford is sweet to her spirit.”

By then Williams was editing *Others* in Rutherford and writing Stevens about a batch of poems Stevens had sent him earlier. Among them was a draft of Stevens’s unfinished “For an Old Woman in a Wig,” written in rhymed terza rima, no doubt as a nod to Walter Arensberg, who had been translating the *Divine Comedy*. Many of Stevens’s three-line stanzas still had gaps in them, and the rhyming remained for the most part plodding, but he did manage to catch something of Dante’s masculine clarity and authority. The fragment



was mostly scrawled in pencil with many erasures, and Stevens would soon abandon the form while he worked and reworked the ideas contained therein for decades to come. For his part, Williams liked the final lines especially, he told Stevens, because there he'd allowed himself to "become fervent for a moment." Forget the epic poetry of sky and sea, Stevens had written there. Better to push into the "unknown new" all around one and see what might be discovered there. The poem of the present, then: there was a worthwhile project.

A week later Williams wrote Stevens again, congratulating him "on winning 'ARRIET'S prize!" for Three Travelers. He was keeping a copy of Stevens's "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" for the July issue of *Others* because it was "a splendid poem," though "a change or two" would "strengthen the poem materially." The first edit was to change the second line from "Within our bellies, as a chariot" to "Within our bellies, we her chariot." Williams wanted the change because "THE WORMS ARE HER CHARIOT AND NOT ONLY SEEM HER CHARIOT," he wrote in bold caps. "'We her chariot' has more of a collective sense and feels more solid." Then he added, "What do you say?" He also urged Stevens to remove two lines from another poem which he thought too sentimental. "For Christ's sake," he wrote, "yield to me and become great and famous," which was what Stevens did.

"The Worms at Heaven's Gate" is a dark poem. Macabre, really, dealing as it does with the fleetingness of a woman's beauty, even the beauty of a Badroulbador lifted from the pages of *Arabian Nights*, reputedly the most beautiful woman in the world. It was not the lark at heaven's gate this time round, as Shakespeare had it, but worms lifting the body piecemeal toward the empty heavens. Nine lines, with the last line, following a long silence, returning the reader to the opening, with a new ring of horror:

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador,

Within our bellies, we her chariot.

Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,

The lashes of that eye and its white lid.

Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,

And, finger after finger, here, the hand,

The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,

The bundle of the body and the feet.

.....

Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbador.

From St. Paul that June, Stevens wrote Elsie that nobody seemed to recognize him for the "Eminent Vers Libriste" he was. In a parody of a newspaper report, he wrote that "Wallace Stevens, the playwright and barrister," had "arrived at Union Station, at 10:30 o'clock this morning," where "some thirty representatives were not present to greet him." When "asked how he liked St. Paul, Mr. Stevens, borrowing a cigar, said, 'I like it.'?"

Just now the news was all about General “Black Jack” Pershing leading a large expeditionary force into Mexico in an attempt—unsuccessful, as it turned out—to capture Pancho Villa. Stevens was impressed with the squads of recruits—husky, virile young men—drilling in the square opposite the Minnesota Club, where he was staying. But he was not impressed with President Wilson’s handling of the situation, feeling he’d made a serious mistake in sending American troops into Mexico without first declaring war. But then, he added, staunch Republican that he was, Wilson, a Democrat, had “an unfortunate ease” in getting the country into messes. “Why all this horror of what must be done,” he wondered. After all, a good fight might be just the thing to settle the matter.

One evening, returning to the Club after work, he happened to pass his uncle Jim on the street, but instead of stopping to say hello, he just kept walking. “It was very nice to see him and not to be recognized,” he wrote Elsie. After all, what was there to say? Family relations were stupid, and he was sure that, after asking each other a few questions, “there’d be nothing in the world to talk about except Japan,” and he felt no need to talk about Japan. Three years later the scene would be repeated when Stevens was in Cleveland, where his brother Garrett was now practicing law. One afternoon he spotted his brother on the street, but—having nothing to say—crossed the street and just kept walking.

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BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS ON THE other hand did matter, and Jim Kearney certainly looked upon Stevens as a valued asset. It was Kearney who saw to it that the Stevenses had comfortable housing when they moved that summer from their hotel to Farmington, a fifteen-minute trolley ride along tree-shaded Farmington Avenue. Then, in late August, they were able to move to 594 Prospect Avenue, an extensive three-story dark brick apartment building on the corner of Farmington Avenue, two miles from Stevens’s office, so that he could get in his daily exercise, breathing in the Connecticut air as he walked briskly to and from work.

At first he and Elsie hobnobbed with the best of Hartford’s society, though in time, given Elsie’s awkward shyness, they would isolate themselves more and more. But on January 26, 1917, with Elsie in Reading caring for her sick mother, Stevens attended a dinner at the Heubleins’, an extremely successful German American family who had made a fortune with their A-1 Steak Sauce and then with ready-made bottled cocktails and later would make millions with Smirnoff’s vodka, the “new white whiskey.” That evening turned out to be “a regular blowout,” with everybody, Stevens wrote, “dressed like a warlord” except himself, who looked more like that image of Ben Franklin one found on boxes of Quaker Oats. Among those he’d met was the Viennese Wagnerian soprano Melanie Kurt, “one of the best singers at the Metropolitan Opera,” whose career would be cut short just months later when the United States, after declaring war on Germany, forbade Wagner’s operas from being performed.

In February Stevens traveled with Kearney to Omaha on business, and when that project had to be aborted, the two returned to Minneapolis, where Stevens headed south to Houston by himself. There were high winds and snow throughout Minnesota, so that Stevens’s train was delayed twelve hours. Even then it had to inch along, following a snow plow clearing the tracks while the winds howled incessantly. Houston, on the other hand, was like July, with japonica and peach in full bloom and people watering their lawns. The local agent there drove him out to Rice University, with its handsome buildings and faculty culled from Oxford, Harvard, and Princeton, who, Stevens believed, would in time transform Houston’s prairie goats into civilized sheep. From there it was on to San Antonio and Cuero, before he headed back to Chicago.

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WHEN LAURA SHERRY, PRODUCER for the Wisconsin Players, read *Three Travelers* in the pages of *Poetry*, she wrote Stevens asking if he would write a one-act play for her troupe, and Stevens happily obliged by writing *Carlos among the Candles*. His intention was not to produce something dramatic, he explained to Bancel LaFarge, who would design the set, but rather to show how people were affected by what was around them. Consider, he explained, the effect of a single candle upon the senses. Vary the number of candles lit or extinguished in a dark room, and one's emotions and sense associations were likewise affected. Thus at one point, *Carlos*, the lone speaker on the stage, tells his audience that a dozen blazing candles on the table are "like twelve wild birds flying in autumn," and that—as he extinguishes them one by one and the darkness becomes more visible—one imagines the twelve birds disappearing one after the other into the dark of winter.

On Saturday evening, October 20, Stevens was in New York to see the sole performance of *Carlos*. This took place in conjunction with several other one-act plays at the new, experimental Neighborhood Playhouse at 466 Grand Street, within sight of the Brooklyn Bridge, and was performed by the Wisconsin Players. Along with Providence Playhouse and the Washington Square Players, the Neighborhood Players in the largely Jewish section of the city was among New York's first "little theaters" and sat some three hundred, presenting work by O'Neill, Shaw, and Joyce. But, though a few critics were enthusiastic about the performance of *Carlos*, from Stevens's perspective the play was a disaster.

He was not, of course, interested "in proving anything to the critics," he explained to Monroe that Halloween, just days after another of his one-act plays, *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, was performed at the same playhouse by the same players. Ralph Block, reviewing *Carlos* for the *New York Tribune*, wrote that the purpose of this kind of entertainment . . . appears to be to say something that has no meaning at all with all the bearing of significance." The critics were justified in whatever they said, and "would have been in saying anything," Stevens admitted. Still, a play, even without action or characters, "ought to be within the range of human interests." But wasn't that the problem? Ever since Aristotle, plays had to have a "form . . . like a sonnet," with "passion, development and so on," even though the Players were interested in experimenting with new forms altogether. But, then, what did he know? It was "all Swedish" to him.

Two decades later he admitted that he would have "been more interested in the theatre" if the actual performance of his plays had not given him "the horrors." Take the stage set for *Carlos*, for instance, which had been cobbled together by some schoolboy. Or the actor who managed "to forget three pages of a text made up of only ten or twelve pages." No wonder the management had refused to allow the play to run a second night.

From the Hillsboro Hotel in Tampa in mid-November, he wrote his friend Reyher to say that the Players had finally "returned to Milwaukee, thank God." *Poetry Magazine* would publish *Carlos* in its December 1917 number, and, if Reyher read it, he would "have no difficulty in imagining the feelings of a Russian damsel among the Bolsheviki." Besides, he had more pressing things on his mind, among them seeing that Elsie was settled as smoothly as possible back in the Highland Court Hotel while a more spacious fourth-floor apartment was readied for them at the St. Nicholas complex at 210 Farmington Avenue, just a mile from Stevens's office. In early December they moved into apartment D1, where they would remain for the next six years and where Stevens would finish his first book of poems.

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IN HIS PROLOGUE TO *Kora in Hell* (1920), William Carlos Williams quotes from a letter Stevens wrote him, dated April 9, 1918. Stevens had written to thank Williams for a copy of *Al Que Quiere* and added at the top of his letter a postscript: "I think, after all, I should rather send this than not, although it is

quarrelsome full of my own ideas of discipline.” Williams included the letter because what Stevens said there spoke to how the two poets differed in their approaches to the poem. Stevens was “a fine gentleman,” Williams began, a man whom their mutual friend Skip Cannell had nailed by likening him to a “Pennsylvania Dutchman who has suddenly become aware of his habits and taken to ‘society’ in self-defense.”

What most struck him about Williams’s poems was “their casual character,” Stevens began, so that the books Williams had thus far published had about them the sense of a miscellany. That was an approach Stevens himself disliked, and the reason he had not yet bothered to publish a book of his own. For Stevens it was necessary to stick with an idea if one had any hope of conveying that idea to a reader. “Given a fixed point of view,” he explained, whether realistic or imagistic, everything eventually “adjusted itself to that point of view.” But to keep playing with points of view, as Williams did, led “always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility.”

“A single manner or mood thoroughly matured and exploited is that fresh thing,” he explained, and the essential Williams was to be found in lines like those about “children / Leaping around a dead dog.” A book of that would surely “feed the hungry.” In any event, a book of poems was “a damned serious affair,” and a book by Williams should contain only what was distinctive about Williams’s style and nothing else. Stevens had found that quality everywhere in *Al Que Quiere*, “but dissipated and obscured.” There were “very few men who have anything native in them or for whose work I’d give a Bolshevik ruble,” he added. Williams should follow with full force his search for an American idiom and his New Jersey landscapes, and not fiddle with anything else.

But what would Stevens have him do with his Circe, Williams asked in his sexually fraught sleight-of-hand manner, now that he’d “double-crossed her game” and slept with her? Marry her? That was not what Odysseus had done. For his part, Stevens would hold out for a unified volume, excluding as many fine poems from the book he would title *Harmonium* as he would include, so that it would take another five years to craft the book he wanted.

In the meantime he kept composing. The December 1917 issue of *Others* published “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” along with four other poems. It may well be the first of Stevens’s poems to include something of the world of Connecticut, his new home, in its wintry landscape, and with the war very much in the background. It is not the nightingale or the robin, but the blackbird which dominates the thirteen haiku-like sections of Stevens’s signature poem, the poem which, with its thirteen marble markers, now greets—if that is the word—those who look for Stevens in Hartford today, between the place where he worked and the place he lived.

“Among twenty snowy mountains,” the poem begins, “the only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird.” The poem ends with the blackbird once more, this time sitting “in the cedar-limbs” in the long evening of a winter’s afternoon, where “it was snowing / And it was going to snow.” In the middle section of the poem, Stevens addresses “the thin men of Haddam.” Haddam: one of those small American towns (population seven thousand) that sounds as if it should be a town in the Bible but instead lies twenty-seven miles south of Hartford along the Connecticut River. Why, the poet asks, should one spend one’s time imagining golden birds when actual blackbirds walk “around the feet / Of the women about you”? No matter where our thoughts are, death the blackbird is a part of what we know and what we feel. In “the long window / With barbaric glass” out of which we look onto the world about us, or within us, one thing is sure: that “the shadow of the blackbird” has crossed and will continue to cross that window, its shadow tracing the unnamed, “indecipherable cause,” death.

A year later his poem on the failure of his marriage, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," appeared. In a dramatic monologue in the voice of a fictive uncle, Stevens's play on the words of the title make light of the tragedy of what had come of his marriage: *Dans ces lignes, mon cher, je t'envoie mes regrets sincères pour les dix dernières années.* "In these lines, my dear, I send you my sincere regrets for the last ten years." The title itself calls to mind Donald Evans's sonnet "En Monocle," the lines themselves Stevens's reprise ten years on. Elsie was no longer his golden girl of eighteen, but a woman who at thirty-two still dressed in the style of thirty years before, Pennsylvania Dutch drab, her hair down now, and sex a strained affair at the least. "Born with a monocle he stares at life," Evans's poem begins:

His calm moustache points to the ironies,

And a faun-colored laugh sucks in the night . . .

Features are fixtures when the face is fled,

And we are left the husks of tarnished hair;

But he is one who lusts uncomforted

To kiss the naked phrase quite unaware.

Pound and Eliot were covering similar ground at the time, and even Williams had flirted with it. It was an attitude lauded among the decadents of the Yellow Nineties, but carried now on the fetid winds of the Great War and Dada, and Stevens had breathed in its air, basking in that sachet-scented wasteland as well. Whatever Elsie had meant to him in his loneliness in New York in those early years lay buried now in the same dark earth of Reading, along with memories of his parents. "Mother of heaven," "Le Monocle" begins, invoking Mary in a parody of the Catholic litany. Or is this Stevens's version of the Perfect Woman, this "regina of the clouds," this "sceptre of the sun" and "crown of the moon"? In any case this much he knows: that he has perfected a language with which to mock his own failed attempt to turn his golden girl from Reading into the Perfect Woman.

But does he mock her, or merely himself in such magnificent measures? Once she was his Venus rising full-blown from the sea, born of an imagination gone amuck, and now the unforgiving "sea of spuming thought" mocks him with "the radiant bubble that she was." Bleak reality returns things to what they are: "A deep up-pouring from some saltier well / Within me, bursts its watery syllable." A young man of fortune at last meets a man of forty. Yes, it is spring again, a time when birds build their nests and sing, to remind him that his own springtime is gone now, irretrievably, "past meridian," and that these spring "choirs of welcome" choir for him only farewells.

Consider those Japanese beauties brought to life in the prints of Utamaro in the eighteenth century, which influenced so many of the French impressionists. Consider the sensuous nuances the Japanese artist caught in the "all-speaking braids" of those ladies. Consider too "the mountainous coiffures of Bath," those London ladies of the Enlightenment on holiday with their luscious locks. Have "all those barbers lived in vain / That not one curl in nature has survived?" And why is it, he asks the woman with him in their bedroom, that "without pity on these studious ghosts / . . . you come dripping in your hair from sleep?"

Once you were Eve, the "Untasted" one in that "heavenly, orchard air" of Eden, and you proffered your apple, which in time ripened and then fell to the ground to rot there, as flesh will do. In the beginning, in Eden, love was "a book too mad to read." But now we have all the time to read it at our leisure. Think first of

the budding amorist and then of the balding amorist at forty, when

amours shrink

Into the compass and curriculum

Of introspective exiles, lecturing.

Now our fall harvest has come, and we are its fruits: "Two golden gourds distended on our vines," hanging

like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,

Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,

Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.

The laughing sky will see the two of us

Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

The poem keeps circling itself with each end-stopped stanza, like concentric circles flowing from an open wound. "If sex were all," the poet mocks himself, "then every trembling hand / Could make us squeak, like dolls, the wished for words." And what is married life at forty? "Last night," the poet laments, recalling that the "first, foremost law" of life demands that we regenerate our kind before death takes us if we are to live on at all, last night "we sat beside a pool of pink, / Keen to the point of starlight, while a frog / Boomed from his very belly odious chords."

Sing as you will, weep and grunt and play doleful heroics, all life ends in death. When he was younger, he could afford to observe "the nature of mankind, / In lordly study," for love then was a subject he could swallow, a mere "gobbet in my mincing world." Later, "like a rose rabbi," he could pursue "the origin and course / Of love." But now what he sees is that all things flutter in a constant flux, that all shades of nuanced understanding must resolve themselves into the final shade of death. When the mind tires finally of beating its wings against the void, he too will flutter to the ground, dropping like that apple, to assume the final shade of death, from which there will be no escaping.

• • •

"I'VE HAD THE BLOOMING horrors, following my gossip about death, at your house," Stevens wrote Monroe in early April 1918, three weeks after his first visit to her. The war was well into its fourth year and America was now shipping out thousands of young men who would never return. Over three hundred of his Harvard classmates had volunteered to serve in some capacity in the effort to bring the war to end all wars to a speedy close. But Stevens was not one of them, and the failure to be part of that effort seems to have troubled him deeply. A million and more young men and women, his sister Katherine among them, had volunteered to do their part. So, if he had dwelt too long on death that evening, he told Monroe, it was because what absorbed him these days were war and death.

So many people were directly involved in the war, whereas for him it was essentially a thing to think about. He was approaching forty when he wrote this, so he might have been excused because of his age. If anything, his time to have served would have been during the Spanish-American War, as a number of his

Reading classmates had done. But he was in college then, and that had certainly seemed a good enough excuse. Now he was married and had a wife to take care of. Excuses, surely, and decent ones. Still, the fact was that he was safe, while so many others, younger than he, were dying every day.

That spring he made several unbearably boring trips to Tennessee, dreaming only of getting back to Hartford, where he could finally “sleep in a big chair over a big book.” But he’d seen something in Chattanooga just two weeks after America had entered the war that had deeply stirred him: the sight of young men in uniform, even if for the moment there was nothing for them to do but walk about or crowd into his hotel for a decent meal. Soon enough they would be on their way to France and, he believed, would get the job done for which they were being sent.

A few days later, now in Johnson City, he noted with unexpected but real pride that a trainload of “Negro” draftees had passed through the night before, and the local blacks on the platform had gone up and down shaking hands with the men on the train, cheering them on, to the amusement of the few whites there who regarded the scene as an absurdity. He’d tried to understand things from the southern white point of view and so take part in laughing “at these absurd animals,” because that was what one was expected to do. But what he’d felt instead was a thrill at these young soldiers, so that he had wanted “to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air,” because it made no difference, finally, whether a man was black or white, for every one of them was his fellow countryman, and all stood ready to fight a common enemy.

He’d tried to acknowledge the reality of war by imagining what death by bullet or bayonet or bombardment might feel like, but he knew that the reality of war was too much for any poet to capture. The summer before, he’d read Eugène Emmanuel Lemerrier’s *Lettres d’un Soldat* (août 1914–avril 1915) and been deeply moved by it. A young landscape artist, Lemerrier had joined the French Army at the outbreak of the war in August 1914. In the nine months following, until he disappeared during a heavy bombardment of his trenches by the Germans, he had continued to write to his mother about the terrible faces of war and of the consolations he looked for in his Catholic faith, his art, and, finally, in the band of brothers he fought beside. André Chevrillon had provided a preface to the letters when they were first published in 1916, and this too had resonated powerfully with Stevens. “To fight with his brothers,” one translation reads, “with his eyes wide open, without hope of glory or profit, and simply because this is the law, here is the commandment that the god gives to the warrior Arjuna when he doubts that he must turn away from the absolute toward the human nightmare of battle. . . . Let Arjuna stretch his bow with the others.”

To turn away, then, even from the consolations of the imagination, and with one’s eyes wide open to the reality of war: that was the challenge facing Stevens. So he took what he could from the letters and turned them into taut, stripped lyrics as he tried to place himself imaginatively in the face of an overwhelming reality, one with the power to turn Emerson’s transcendent all-seeing eye into a soldier’s eyeball blown from its socket and lying now in the mud. “If I should fall, as soldier,” Stevens wrote,

I know well

The final pulse of blood from this good heart

Would taste, precisely, as they said it would.

17 mars 1915, with three weeks left before Lemerrier would die: J’ai oublié de te dire que, l’autre fois, pendant la tempête, j’ai vu dans le soir les grues revenir. Une accalmie permettait d’entendre leur cri. “I forgot to tell you that the other evening, during the storm, I saw the cranes returning. A lull allowed me to hear their cry.” Lemerrier’s was a sensibility much like Stevens’s, ever on the outlook for the cry of birds,

even in hell. “The cranes return,” Stevens wrote. “The soldier hears their cry. He knows the fire / That touches them.” In time he would discard these lines as unequal to the tragic loss of a soldier. All that would survive his scrutiny is a single quatrain in which he attempts to revive the ancient trope of the “theater of war,” something older than Virgil or Homer or Ashurbanipal, something as old as the human race itself.

Nine sections of the antiwar poem’s original thirteen made it into the May 1918 number of Poetry, after Stevens and Monroe had gone back and forth on which to include and in what order. They plotted this together in the offices of Poetry late on the afternoon of March 14, as Stevens was preparing to return home from Indianapolis, having completed some old business there. That was the day he’d gone on and on about the inscrutable banality of death in the trenches. And yet none of these war poems made it into the first edition of Harmonium, though in the revised version of 1931, “The Death of a Soldier,” along with two others, would return.

“Life contracts and death is expected,” Stevens wrote there, and though Lemercier had been killed in the spring of 1915, Stevens thought it more appropriate to alter the season to autumn. Nor was there any hope for Christian rebirth here. In death the soldier did not “become a three-days personage, / Imposing his separation, / Calling for pomp.” The war had taught Stevens this: “Death is absolute and without memorial,” and “as in a season of autumn,” the wind would stop, and “the clouds go, nevertheless, / In their direction.”

A month later, in the pages of the Little Review, Margaret Anderson published—along with a sizable segment of Joyce’s *Ulysses*—three poems by Stevens: “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand,” “Depression before Spring,” and “Metaphors of a Magnifico.” How to describe a troop—or a trope—of, say, twenty men “crossing a bridge, / Into a village”? Were they “twenty men crossing twenty bridges, / Into twenty villages”? Or was it “one man” only, “crossing a single bridge into a village”? Or, as Gertrude Stein might have said, were “twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village,” simply “twenty men crossing a bridge / Into a village”? But what did such a statement tell us, if it told us anything? Or did the real come down finally to a prelinguistic sense of things, as in a series of fragmented aural and visual images? The sound of twenty men’s boots clumping on the wooden boards of a bridge. That, and the “first white wall of the village” rising through fruit trees as the scene changed, as in Duchamp’s *Nude*: “The first white wall of the village . . . / The fruit trees,” the the . . .

• • •

ON CHRISTMAS EVE 1918, William Carlos Williams watched as his dying father slipped into a coma. At one point he turned to his mother to tell her that her husband was gone now, only to see his father, eyes shut, shake his head slowly from side to side. “Dear Stevens,” he wrote that evening, “Three Amens! It might be three blackbirds or three blue jays in the snow—but it is three Amens!” His wife was downstairs trimming the tree and the boys were in the room next to him, already fast asleep. “What in God’s name” could “a man say to Christ these days”? Christmas morning he added a postscript, thanking Stevens for his poetic criticism in the latest Little Review. He was referring to “Nuances of a Theme by Williams,” Stevens’s take on Williams’s four-line poem “El Hombre.” “It’s a strange courage / you give me ancient star,” Williams had written, one more poet among many remaking poetry now. Nor did it matter if his poems survived. What did matter was that—like the star—he continue to “shine alone in the sunrise” toward which he lent no part.

Stevens saw a chance to point out some of the differences between what Williams was up to and what he himself would have added to that spareness. “Shine alone, shine nakedly,” Stevens wrote:

Be not chimera of morning,



Half-man, half-star.

Be not an intelligence,

Like a widow's bird

Or an old horse.

The eye of that blackbird again. A hard truth to grasp, especially on a Christmas morning with one's "poor dear father" dead. Who, after all, could really say what the loss of one's father might mean for oneself or one's work?

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