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I, Juliana Gray Vice **,**

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HANGING BIG MARY AND OTHER POEMS

Approved by:

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Professor John Drury

Dr. Don Bogen

HANGING BIG MARY
and other poems

A dissertation submitted to the

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by

Juliana Gray Vice

B.A., University of Alabama, 1994
M.A., University of Tennessee, 1997

Committee Chair: Professor Andrew Hudgins

Juliana Gray Vice

Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation, *Hanging Big Mary and Other Poems,* is a collection of original poems by the author, Juliana Gray Vice. The poems address a range of subject matters and themes, though they are bound by a strong sense of voice and Southern identity. Ecology, race, history and personal autobiography are among the subjects addressed. A range of poetic forms is also used, including blank verse, formal sonnets, and free verse.

The dissertation also includes a critical paper, "Beholding Nothing: Wallace Stevens's Paradox of the Imagination in 'The Snow Man' and 'The Plain Sense of Things.'" This paper uses these two poems, written at opposite ends of Stevens's career, to illustrate Stevens's ongoing struggle with the paradox of using the metaphor of poetry to express a reality without metaphors, and the development of his ideas over the span of his career.

Acknowledgments

The list of “those without whoms” is a long one for this collection of poems, but it begins and ends with my parents, Jerry and Kay Gray. Many thanks go to Andrew Hudgins and Erin McGraw, wonderful teachers and great friends. A long list of other teachers also deserves my thanks: Don Bogen, John Drury, Arthur Smith, Marilyn Kallett, Thomas Rabbitt, John Allison, Rodney Jones, Wyatt Prunty, Dave Smith, Mary Jo Salter and Robert Hass. Many thanks and much love to everyone at the Sewanee Writers’ Conference: Cheri Peters, Phil Stephens, Greg Williamson, Danny Anderson, Leah Stewart, Kevin Wilson, Leigh Anne Couch, Liz Van Hoose and Ron Briggs. Thanks to Jim Murphy, Lynn Shaffer, Cynthia Ris, Michele Griegel, Brad Quinn, Mike Everton, Chris Mohney and many more for your friendship. Thanks to Donald Justice for his poetry. And most of all, thanks to my husband, Brad Vice, the biggest “without whom” of them all.

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Here there be monsters

Here is destiny, marked out in the hand:
rough calluses or none, nails sculptured
or bitten, the swelling of knuckles,
lines in the palm. Scarring, too,
is taken into account. All flesh is relevant.

A man with two hooks leering from his sleeves
is cursed above all men. He wakes to sighing metal,
the scrape of icebergs shifting at sea.
When a ghost hand itches in featureless dreams,
one memory reaches to scratch the other.

I know enough of palmistry
to read the wrongness of my lines,
the lifeline snapped midway,
resumed and deeply forked,
two wrinkled children, the erratum
of a freckle below the middle finger.
Saturn rules that finger, and the line of fate.
To read further is to be cursed with knowing.

Anniston

Only when I moved to Tuscaloosa,
a hundred miles of pine and flowering scrub
from home, in a classroom choked with weary dust—
only then a Yankee teacher told me
a freedom rider bus was firebombed
in my home town. Our gradeschool books had skipped
from boll weevils to Werner Von Braun,
and Wallace was a god. But there it is:
in May of 1961, a group
of students, black and white, driving down
from Washington, D.C., was stopped outside
of Anniston. The white men forced them out
and beat them while the Greyhound roared in flames.
They beat them with chains. Or didn't. The men were Klan,
or town fathers, or a redneck gang from Georgia.
Perhaps there were two buses, and the beating came
in Birmingham. The single photograph
shows black students in white shirts sitting
on grass before the burned-out skeleton.
No landmarks dot the background—this could
be anywhere, but must be Highway 9,
or 431 down from Gadsden,

or 21, winding past the Fort,

or 78, the road I took to school,

where no one taught me this. But someone must

remember, must mark the spot when they drive past,

must notice how the kudzu's creeping up,

or how the extra lanes have paved it smooth

like homemade icing over a sunken cake.

Anniston began as Oxford Furnace,

smelting iron ore in the Civil War,

then lay abandoned til 1872,

when Tyler and Noble bought the rusting works,

renamed it Woodstock Furnace Company,

survived the Panic of 1873,

and incorporated Anniston. My books

tell me this much. I've played in Tyler Park

and shopped on Noble Street, and both men's graves

were well-kept sites for grade school pilgrimage.

At Christmastime, the streets downtown are hung

with countless ropes of tiny white lights,

and we'd drive down every block, past every store

that glimmered bright, admiring our pretty town.

The dirt in Anniston is blood-red clay,

too poor for cotton; no plantations rose

below Mount Cheaha, and slaves belonged

to other, richer lives further south.

But still that bus. But still that fire, those chains.

But still our clay is streaked with history's ash,

the only marker the town will still deny.

Berman Museum of Military History, Anniston, Alabama

More rifles, pistols, flintlocks, muskets, carbines,
revolvers, daggers, sabers, bayonets,
scimitars, short swords, broadswords, spears,
crossbows, long bows, suits of armor, shells
and medals than I could ever classify,
though Berman could. The collection filled his house
until he cut a deal with the town, loaded
fifty years' obsession, and brought it here.
Some is booty from the war, but most
he bought at auction, odd antiquities,
a rich man's toys. Upstairs is modern war,
below the ancient weaponry, most scuffed
and dented, some with gems still flashing bold
from hilts and scabbards. Mounted on the wall,
a Japanese beheading sword hangs
beside a photo Berman claimed he found
within an abandoned camera in Kagoshima--
a kneeling soldier in the street, his ruined face
caught as the blade divorces bone from bone.

In nearby cases rest more trophies, guns,
grenades, uncrumpled maps and uniforms,

badges, patches, snapshots of the dead.

Among it all, in over-lit display,

sits Adolf Hitler's silver tea service.

The cups, the pot, the saucers, sugar bowl

and spoons, the tiny pitcher for cream, the tray--

their surfaces gleam as bright as when their master

held them under Bavarian sunshine, stirred

his drink, and tapped the spoon against the rim

to hear the perfect tone. The light refracts

against engraved initials, spins out red

and green from the double-headed eagle's wings.

There's nothing here that surpasses it.

Blackberrying

It's hot, even with the August sun
about to fall beyond the break of pines,
but the woman and her daughters still wear jeans
against the thorns. The mother leads the girls
across the backyard, past the graves
of pets, deeper into scrub that can't
be called woods, or yard, a tangle of green
in which they try to remember the springtime white
of blossoms, to find the berries, swollen, dark
with juice that stains their fingertips like blood.

The woman sends her daughters north and south,
moving between them, watching both. One
is hiding, though her mother sees her, eating more
than she drops in her bowl. The other is serious,
picks but doesn't taste, waiting for
the cobbler her mother promised to bake tonight,
the tangy fruit transformed, impossibly sweet
in syrup bubbling under biscuit dough.
The woman knows the patient girl will scold
the thief, who might decide to cry, but both
are laughing now, holding up their prizes,

calling her, “Look at this one! Look
how big it is!” She calls back, laughing, “Yes.”

And which of them was I, if we assume,
as we know we must not assume, but do,
that I was in that tangled, thorny green?
Not the mother, no, but one of her girls—
the one anticipating the blackberry taste,
or the one with juice already purpling
her tongue? Which summer-blond girl was I?
My sister knows, my friends, those who love me.
My mother knows. She watches still, gazing
through the scrawny pines and pin oak, brush
and vine. She’ll never take her eyes away.

Lightning Bugs

Bored with screwing them in jars to light
my way to sleep, I showed my sister
how to seize them by their heads and smear
the miraculous light of their bodies
on our driveway, like luminescent chalk,
just to see our names glowing on the ground.
But by the time I reached my last letter
the first had faded. I crushed another
brittle pair of pixie wings, retracing
what I thought was me. Their smell was sharp,
like rye bread or fresh grass clippings,
and lingered on my hands, those lives
still burning under my skin.

Speaking for the Moon

You cannot comprehend this sky, unblemished
by stars. You cannot know the solemn ease
that settles after an age of pristine night:
no wind, no change, even the dust unstirred
for eons. I have the perfect solitude
of thought (though not what you would recognize
as thought), the choreography of earth
and sun, the dreams (you would not call them dreams)
of oceans. Madmen and lovers fall deranged
without my aid, imagine my waning face
is gazing down in sympathy. But I
am not concerned with this, with human love
or doleful sighs directed at the sky.
The graceful pull of waters, spring and neap,
the ebb and surge of surf over shore--
for these I spend my energies, for them
I wax and wane, seducing the mirrored waves.

The Retired Welder Turns to Gardening

He's gentler now. His swollen hands that worked
on almost every dam in Alabama,
bending steel to fit the concrete seams,
now cradle seeds. His fingers poke the holes
in dirt made rich with cow manure; they drop
the seeds and bury them snug; they pull the weeds;
they pinch tobacco worms from ripe tomatoes.
In younger days his fingers knew the tricks
of prying bottle caps and winding tight
his belt around his fist as the boy stood by,
waiting for his licks. His pitching arm
could lob a whiskey bottle eighty feet,
and he loved the laughing sound of shattered glass
almost as much as his torch's private hum.
Now he no longer loves those things.
The garden, sloping down a hundred feet
to overlook the K-Mart and Dairy Queen,
is mostly meant to fill his table: peas,
zucchini, crookneck squash, collard greens,
a fig tree, okra tapering like knives.
He's generous with what he grows, although
his son looks bemused at the sacks of greens,

and rolls his eyes at boiling them with hamhocks.
The boy (he cannot help but think of him
as still a boy) prefers his fig preserves.
The old man brings collards anyway.

But while he loves his garden's fruits, still more
he loves the oddities. He keeps a patch
of scrubby cotton to show his granddaughters,
plucking bolls and guiding their fingertips
through fibrous clouds to the sticky seeds within.
His sunflowers turn their showy heads and nod,
obedient to the bruised and jet-streaked dusk.
The gourds he hangs from twine, stretching out
their necks, twisting them around poles,
bending not with fire now but time.
As he walks between the rows, the stray cats
he feeds all gather at his heels and follow,
their greedy purrs subdued to background murmur.
The children, the boy and his girls, don't come as much
as he would like, but every time he shows
them how to feel the cotton seeds, and gives
each one a dried-out gourd with a corkscrew neck.
He's gentler now, more patient. The things he loves

will bend to him no more with fire, but time.

Woman in the I-65 Rest Stop

Emerging from a stall, she clicks
across the tiles in backless heels
not meant for driving. The jeans and tee
she'd worn inside are stashed in a bag,
replaced by a tight blouse and skirt,
bare legs, and a look that says,
Now, now we're getting somewhere.
She spreads her lipstick tubes and compacts
like discs of bright, hard candy
across the mirror ledge. She's quick,
meticulous—she's done all this
before—the warped and sagging face
the metal mirror throws back at her
can't distort, can't hide the fact
she's beautiful.

Outside, it's waiting,
another hot and humid night
in Nowhere, Tennessee. The songs
of lovesick tree frogs call to her.
She's almost ready. But does she catch
me watching as she slips her rings

inside her beaded purse? The blood

that flashes to her cheeks—is this

a bloom of eagerness or shame,

or just another trick between

my eyes and these deceitful mirrors?

Her heels ring out staccato beats

as she turns and pushes through the door,

the heavy air coursing past

like a story as I wash my hands,

and the woman doesn't look back.

Sailing the Body

The tallest girl in my kindergarten class,
I grew so fast my mother swore I skipped
every other shoe size. We shopped for boys'
blue jeans, Wranglers, until my hips caught up
with gangling legs. In high school gym, I grew
adept at holding one shirt across my chest
while pulling on another, at hiding skin
and itchy bra. The body shaped itself
without consent, swelled and curved beyond
decorum, reconfiguring the bones.

The Portuguese explorers, gazing west
at unsuspected waves, perhaps despaired
and wept for all the maps to burn. They called
the sea Pacific out of hope, to persuade
the surging waters of their own disguise. They might
have named them Flatness, Slow, Unchanged Since Birth.
Their breakers still would billow and swirl.

Panty Thief

The math was wrong, for one thing. Ten days' laundry
and only three pairs? All white? And nothing else gone?
On the walk back to my apartment, I glared
over my basket. All men were suspect.
Which one had slipped into laundry room
and removed the still-damp lovelies from the dryer?
By now they're laid out on some dream-rumpled bed.
He fingers the silky black florals
with lace around the waist. The airy cottons
wait, poised in a slumberous row. He pulls
the green bikinis over his hips, surprised,
as I was, at how little fabric there is.
How exciting such a theft must be; they are his now
as much as mine. We check our figures
in the mirror, and like what we see.

The Panty Thief in Jail

Seeing him on television
after the arrest,
I couldn't help
feeling sorry for him.
In the still mug shot
his hair
was a black thornbush.
One eye looked at the camera,
the other
at something I couldn't see.
I doubt I would have looked better
if everything
I loved
had been seized in an instant.
The story showed police
dumping
a trash bag filled
with women's underclothes,
seven years of collecting,
on the station floor,
their rumpled colors
like butterfly wings.

Some of them must be mine,

plucked from a laundromat dryer

months ago.

Then I was merely angry.

Now I admire

his industry,

his devotion,

how much he must have loved his work.

In a cell

without colors or silks,

he must dream of those wings

that took him

where he hungered to be.

The Editor's Dog

We thank you for thinking of us, and taking time
to stroll around the block. We liked the speed
of your youthful pace (as brisk as Master's prime),
but found your walk does not fulfil our needs.

You hurried us at hydrants, at trees and lawns
we wished to sniff. You led down streets
we do not like, and wrested from our jaws
a dainty bit of trash we'd hoped to eat.

And as for your banter, "Good girl" and "No"—
we found it irredeemably cliched.
But worst of all the poor technique you showed
in tidying up—more poop than scoop, as they say.

We thank you for the walk that you submitted,
But for the future, we've chosen to solicit.

The Ordinary Killer

Papaya flesh surrenders to his thumb's
gentle pressure. He adds it to the cart,
beside the pint of strawberries, the grapes,
the unripe avocado. He can't forget
the ice cream—Breyer's real vanilla bean.
Cecilia's cravings always come at night,
and even though he's read that they should end
by the second trimester, she still insists,
and gives him lists specific and complex
as fingerprints. He likes to shop at night,
when the store is almost empty, the sounds of his steps
are hushed, the omnipresent lights so bright
they cast no shadows. He needs the harshest light
in his sterile office, where kids try not to squirm
as he adjusts their braces, twisting wires
and gluing brackets to make the crooked straight.
The store's fluorescent lights are bright but soft,
and he relaxes, strolls along the shelves,
and feels luxurious. A little girl
as blond as cornsilk peers down his aisle.
He waves, but she laughs and runs away with him
still wiggling his fingers around a jar

of marinated artichoke hearts.

And none of this, nothing, makes him think
of Alice. He's not reminded of that girl
whose cornsilk hair once gleamed at him, whose face
he used to think he saw in playgrounds and parks,
or anywhere he went. He hadn't meant
to do it, hadn't meant to go so far.
He'd only wanted to look at her, to see
if living bodies were like those magazines
he'd found inside his father's toolbox, or if
his adolescent prick could would also rise
and sing a greater glory for another's touch.
He lured her underneath the darkened stairs
behind the school, calling, Alice, come here.
Alice, Alice, I want to show you something.
He made her promise not to tell, but she
was only eight, and he knew he had no choice,
and the skin around her neck was just as soft
beneath his flushed, uneducated hands.

But that was almost twenty years ago,
and he doesn't think about it now. The cops

never even questioned him, a boy
of only fourteen. And since he never told,
never spoke the deed aloud even
to himself, the fact of what he'd done
dissolved into fantasy and dream.
A secret never shared grows indistinct,
untrustworthy as rumor, half-believed.
And now the little girl he's just seen,
that golden girl in the cold and perfect light,
reminds him only of his impending child.
The ultrasound revealed a watery smudge,
his tadpole progeny. Cecilia refused
the doctor's offer to reveal its sex;
she wanted them to be surprised, she said.
And he supposes now that he's content
to be surprised, and the sunny yellow paint
they picked for the nursery walls will welcome home
whatever little stranger the doctors place
in his arms. He supposes he can teach a son
the things he needs to know, the games and rules
and mysteries, and learn to guide a daughter
through the strange, inscrutable lives of girls.
But when Cecilia sweetly asks which one

he’s really hoping for, he feels his heart
betray his trust that it will always beat,
feels his body trying to escape
the trap of what he is. He tells his wife
he isn’t hoping for a boy or girl,
just a healthy baby. He doesn’t know
which one is better, safer, he doesn’t know
which one is worse, he doesn’t know if he
can bear to hold it in his wiser hands,
to give it a name and softly call it out.

Noccalula Falls

They've made a park of it,
a trail bordered by dusty marigolds
leading to the falls, a respectable stream
tumbling over good Alabama marble--
more expensive than Italian, we're told--
frothing white for an instant,
then down the Coosa to Gadsden.

Water is water. More interesting the polished plaque:

how the Indian princess, Noccalula,
rather than marry at her father's command,
threw herself over the falls,
which he named for her in grief.

Even as visitors snap at the words,
something uneasy filters in,
even as the zoo's one shabby lion
behind two circles of chain-link
looms so dark and obsolete
that the developed shot will hold only outline
and the glint of an eye,

even then is something a lie

in history and its telling,

so much romance in the Mississippian wilderness,

a tragic tableau waiting to be engraved

and sold in London penny-dreadfuls,

sold to us now, here, paid for

by grim Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill.

We have the names, rolling syllables

older than maps:

Tuscaloosa, Etowah,

Choccolocco, Talladega, Cheaha,

Noccalula,

princess of ghosts.

Shrimpers

They leave the Gulf before sunlight sparks
the waves, and drive their trucks up the interstate
to Birmingham and Gadsden and Anniston
and us. The gravel pops beneath their wheels
in the church's empty parking lot. They stop,
hang up their signs, light a smoke, and wait
for us to come in our station wagons and vans,
hauling coolers and sweaty bags of ice.
The placid men wear clean shirts and shorts,
but still they reek of fish and salt and blood
as they scoop their catch onto scales and pour the mass
in our outstretched coolers. By noon, the trucks
are empty. They hit the breakfast bar at Shoney's,
taking luxury in scrambled eggs,
biscuits, gravy, theirs for easy taking.
Then back in the trucks, to the Gulf, the boats, and home.

And we, in our inland houses, can almost hear
the ocean as we clean the pearly shrimp,
beheading, peeling, choosing which to freeze
for winter gumbo, and which to boil today.
Now and then our grasping hands emerge

from the icy brine with unsuspected jewels:
black urchins, squid, some tiny fish
or shell the shrimpers' nets had blindly caught.
The children squeal but wait their turns to hold
the treasures valued more for their surprise.
They marvel at the shrimpers, who live among
such secret wonders, and seem to take no notice
of miracles they haul into the air.

Stained Glass Man

Christmas ornaments of shining stars
and trees, gleaming angels with brittle wings.
Suncatchers dangling in windowpanes.
And someday, when he was skilled enough to try,
an entire window, beams of tinted sunshine
streaming in by day, electric light
transmuted to gorgeous glowing hues at night.
Maybe roses. Maybe something abstract.
All this, my father promised, he'd make for us
when he'd mastered how to melt and shape the glass.

His mother had been dead almost a year.
He bought some magazines, some bits of glass,
a soldering iron the size of a toothpaste tube,
lead and copper wire. He drank scotch.
The study that he'd made his mother's room
became a workroom once again, the desk
aglitter with chips of ruby, cobalt, jade,
milky opal, black. Outside the door,
we listened to the clink of ordered glass,
and smelled his cigarettes and the oily stink
of molten lead. His first trashed attempts

looked like the ruins of a bankrupt church.

At last he leaned a red and yellow square
against the kitchen windowsill.
Despite his measurements, the pieces skewed
themselves in joining, triangles misaligned,
the seams that didn't match. Beginner's junk,
he joked before returning to his desk.
We heard the hollow clink of glass on glass,
of ice in glass, as he sat in his mother's room
and worked, trying to make the pieces fit.

Hanging Big Mary

Erwin, Tennessee, 1913

The rain had turned the streets to yellow mud
when Charlie Sparks rode out from the circus grounds.
It splashed up from his horse's hooves, thick
and rank as sulphur. The matinee had played
to a packed house. Since Kingsport, every show
was packed, but the crowd had booed and stamped their feet
when Mary didn't perform. By God, thought Sparks,
they'd sure as hell see Mary dance today.

Behind him, in their cars, the motley clowns
were wiping off their makeup, white cream
for white paint. The acrobats removed
their colored tights and pulled on dungarees.
The roustabouts threw meat to ragged lions,
hay to horses, stinking fish to seals.
And last, Sparks knew, the elephants
were placed in line, grasping trunk to tail,
and led in another, the last, grotesque parade.

For Kingsport, too, had been a mock parade,
as Mary led the pack toward a pond.

Charlie Sparks had watched them lumber past
like massive schoolkids, filing out to play.
Then came gunshots and the elephants' blares.
By the time Sparks had galloped to the scene,
the roustabouts had Mary calmed, but the crowd
was chanting for her death, and something like
a man was crushed into the bloody street.

"It's Red Eldridge," a roustabout told Sparks.
"The new trainer." Sparks had never met
the man, but what was left of him—a pulp
of crimsoned bone and brain where his head had been—
made Sparks feel sick, and secretly relieved.
If Mary had killed a Kingsport citizen,
then Sparks would have to kill her. For one of his,
and a new man, Charlie Sparks could lie.

"Now folks," he called, "this here is a tragedy,
and I wish I could kill Mary. I surely do.
But there ain't a gun that's big enough
in this entire country to do the job."
The mothers led their crying kids away,
some men rode off to fetch the coroner,

and Big Mary never even glanced
at the bloody street as the trainers led her back.

But hadn't Sparks remembered, under the lights
that night, as Mary circled before the crowd,
a spangled acrobat upon her back?
Did Sparks recall the rumors—that Mary had killed
before, in other shabby circuses,
under other names? Hadn't her price
been low, her seller's explanations vague?
The news got out, and Johnson City's mayor
swore that he would cancel Sparks's show
unless the vicious elephant was killed.
Then Rogersville joined in, and Sparks was left
to choose the recourse that would cost him less.

Today, in Erwin, Sparks gritted his teeth
and spit as he entered the trainyard. Already kids
festooned the boxcar roofs and cowcatcher,
and chattering townsfolk joined the railroad men
around the powerhouse. Sparks tied his horse
and nodded to the figure—was he a man
or only shadow?—in the derrick car,

but the shape at the controls gave no response.

A trumpet cut the crowd's droning talk,
and even half a mile away that note
stilled the trainyard to churchlike hush. The call
was Mary's, and Sparks detected her alarm.
He spit in the mud again. She couldn't know
what was happening, what would happen
to her. How could that damn, dumb beast know?

From Second Street they came, the last parade
of five elephants, tail-in-trunk,
with Big Mary—Murderous Mary, they called
her now—in the middle. The other elephants
should have calmed her, but Mary's eyes were wild,
round and gleaming black like polished stones.
She swung her great head from side to side
and walked with cautious steps, as if testing the earth
to see if it would crumble under her.

The plainclothes trainers, clowns and acrobats,
strong men, fat ladies and dancing girls,

filed behind like funerary mutes,
then disappeared within the colorless
crowd of miners, railroad men and kids.
The roustabouts broke Mary from the line
and led the others back the way they'd come.
Alone in the center ring, Mary roared.

The talk flared up again, feeding on rumor:
the circus men had hooked an electric charge—
forty thousand volts—to the elephant,
with no effect. The state of Tennessee
had ordered that the beast must be destroyed.
A vigilante gang was on its way
from Kingsport with the biggest gun they had,
the courthouse lawn's Civil War cannon.
The rumors flashed and spread, and even Sparks
no longer knew which, if any, were true.

He watched his men lead Mary to the derrick
and chain her leg to the rail. She rolled her eyes
at the barn-sized hole—or did she only seem
to recognize it?—they'd dug in the mud nearby.
She shook and swayed. She seemed to glare at Sparks;

he jerked his eyes away and tried to find
the shape of a man he'd seen in the derrick car.

The drizzling rain cast a thready veil,
and Sparks could only see a tall black form
inside the car. Behind him, a minister
was preaching that the animal was not
truly evil, but merely demon-possessed.
Sparks ignored his offer to exorcise.
The narrow form at the derrick car controls
slowly turned to face him. It was time.

A roustabout took hold of the heavy chain
that dangled from the derrick boom, and threw
the end around Big Mary's neck.
She wailed and tried to bolt; the men ran back;
the chains around her neck and foot held fast.
She looked like a massive dog tied in a yard,
or like a puppet with dangling, clanking strings.

The derrick squealed, and Mary's head rose
as, link by link, the chain was reeled in.

Her body lifted—she kicked to find the ground—
she might be dancing, performing her big top show.
She gasped for air, her trunk thrashing wild,
her back legs suddenly finding nothing below.

A crack like thunder, and Sparks believed at first
that Mary had been shot, assassinated
by an Erwin rifle, or Red Eldridge's ghost.
But only the chain had snapped, and the screaming crowd
recoiled from the mad, unfettered elephant,
the vicious man-killer, who gracelessly sat
on her mud-splattered haunches, gazing down,
blinking at the pain in her shattered hip.

The roustabouts returned, and scrambled up
the hill of her back to attach a stronger chain.
The Erwin crowd returned for the main event,
but the star performer sat like a flour sack.
All her fight was gone, and Charlie Sparks
felt something like regret. Mary's head
hung down, her trunk snuffling in the yellow mud.
The derrick engine cranked the winch to life.

And this time, Big Mary simply hung.
Her body dangled, twisting, from the chain,
her useless feet pointing at the ground,
her trunk extended stiffly, her open mouth
still trying to taste the air. Silence felled
the gathered crowd, so hushed that Sparks believed
that he could almost hear the slowing thumps
of Big Mary's massive, dying heart.

Did Sparks remember, then, a night some years
ago, when he'd stolen past the sleeping clowns
and trainers to where the elephants were chained,
and softly call the rumored names of killers?
"Hey, Empress. Empress. Queen. My Queen."
And when the new girl, the biggest in his show,
looked up at him in recognition, did Sparks
do nothing more than walk away in the dark?

Whatever her name had been, in circuses
or dusty Bengal streets or secret plains
of India, the elephant was dead.
Her body hung, now reminding Sparks
of nothing, not a dog or flour sack,

but only Mary, the circus poster's boast
of "largest living land animal
on Earth," blue and lifeless in the rain.

The man in the derrick car—too thin, too tall
to be the operator Sparks had met
the day before—seemed to fold his arms
and turn away. His memory could not
reanimate Red Eldridge; his corpse
had not seemed capable of being tall,
or thin, or anything but merely dead.
Eldridge was a man—his death was worse
than Mary's. It had to be. It had to be.

Miners, trainyard men, acrobats,
clowns, animal trainers, roustabouts--
a crowd of thousands—a thousand more, at least,
than Erwin's rolls could boast, a thousand more
than Sparks World-Famous Shows could hold
beneath its fraying big top—the South was all
that Sparks could stand, all he hated and loved.
Only here would he be forced to kill
his star, only here would that be just.

Confederate sons were coming, even now,
determined to defy whatever force
at which their rusted cannons could take aim.

A mile away, four trumpet notes
sounded a mournful call, and did not stop.
As Charlie Sparks rode toward them, he did not think
of anything but the pelting drops of rain.
Later he would curse his oversight
in failing to sell tickets to the hanging.
Later he would send some roustabouts
to the trainyard grave to dig up Mary's head
and cut off her ivory tusks. Later,
later, he would think about dying.
But now he only sat, and rode, and spat,
and added his body's sour, tainted water
to bubbling, frothing pools beneath his feet.

Loving the Knife

To say the name, Sabatier, is an invocation
and its ring against the sharpening wheels
is like a singer warming her throat. I clean the blade
after each carrot or chive, and catch my reflection,

mirror-perfect, in the broad wedge at the handle.
The trick is its motion, never lifting the tip
from the wooden board, rocking through a celery rib
so gracefully it's hard to stop cutting

when the stalk is gone, to slow the flashing rhythm
as it nears my fingertips. I know it would be beautiful,
slicing through bone as easily as fruit, perhaps so sharp
my surrendered finger would roll out bloodless coronas

of marrow within bone within flesh within skin,
like the meat of an olive stained pink near the pit,
or the whorls of a tree trunk whose fallen limbs
still blossom, the years detailed in immaculate rings.

Crossings

I see them now as I didn't then, taking shape
in the brush at the edge of the highway:
their haunches gorgeously muscled,
their necks curved down with intent.
When I was eight years old, six deer
broke from the pine woods and leaped
over the family wagon, clattering on the roof,
one hoof starbursting my window.
A book in my lap, I never saw them coming,
only their flashing tails as they bounded
into the grass on the other side. Strange, then
that they are so clear to me now: smooth flanks,
velvet antlers, striding on bronze hooves
almost too delicate to bear them.
The arc of their leap is flawless grace,
their image a benediction against memory's end.

Venison

I must have been six or seven years old
when the smell of dirty pennies woke me.
Slipping downstairs, I saw my parents
working over fresh meat, a red slab
as big as both my legs, on our dinner table.
With our biggest, sharpest knife, Dad carved
hand-sized chunks, while Mom circled him
with a sponge to catch the blood.
They did not speak, as if to keeping secrets
even from each other.

I cannot remember if they saw me there, watching,
or if I slipped into the welcoming dark.
I hope I was quiet enough, small enough,
quick enough to get away. I hope
they never saw what I saw in them.

Dao, sans Dwin

It was hard to say “I” and mean only myself,
not the Dao-and-Dwin self that was “I”
for the first three years of our life.
Don’t say “Siamese twins”—we were Korean,
joined at the hip, sharing three legs,
genitals, a schizophrenic tangle of organs.
Our clothes were pieced together with lattices
of buttons, zippers, velcro swatches,
whatever it took to make two outfits one.
Mother filled her sewing basket with extra legs.
In videos we scamper through the house,
happy little freaks, chattering in a language of our own.
I can no longer understand my voice on the tape.

I remember being broken apart in stages.
When we first lay in two beds, the nurses
placed us on the wrong sides. I flailed my left arm
while Dwin cried on my right. Mother says we were angry
at each other for weeks, each thinking ourselves abandoned.
I resemble my twin more closely now
than when we were one person. My body
is a network of scars, delicate stitches in rows of “I.”

A Kind of Mirror

Two Siamese twins, baby girls, are separated.
It is hard to watch the rough operation
on such a body, making two smaller selves.
How comforting it must have been, when one
was in pain, to turn her head
and find herself again. What strength there must be
in a body driven by two hearts.

I see the people I used to be,
dim figures on a hill waving hello,
or goodbye, trying to be seen.
If they are calling, their voices are wind.
If they regret themselves, life's turns
that stranded them in memory and dream,
I cannot read their faces.

While joined the twins did not look alike,
when one was sickly and small.
Apart, they grew stronger, the weak one grew,
and they turned to each other's newly mirrored faces.
These are the faces I can't quite see,
like the unexpected reflection in a spoon:

wretched and familiar.

In the Shadows

The leather case, slim in my palm, could carry lipstick.

Capsaiscin stream fires up to six feet,

with marking dye for identification.

One night, here beside the Hebrew College

in Cincinnati, a man ran from behind

and blocked the sidewalk, saying, “Wait!

I want to ask you a question!” I kept walking;

he backed up, still blocking, saying “Wait!”

“What?” I asked, pulling the spray from my pocket,

my thumb poised to slide from safety and shoot.

He held his hands up, fingers spread,

saying “No, no, nevermind,” and backed away.

I don’t know what he wanted-- money, directions?

But this is America, a city, and a woman alone at night.

I would have used it, aimed straight for the eyes,

kept firing until he was on his knees

and kicked him in the head for good measure.

This is the image the manufacturers have dreamed,

or culled from our dreams, photographed

and packaged: a shadowy man hiding

in the bushes, the empty parking lot,

the empty echoing stairwell,

some figment slow and clumsy enough

to be brought down by a pepper spritz.

Real shadows rise up at my side.

No one, the second shadow my own.

Passing a streetlight, another appears; I am three,

I am four, me and all my darkling casts.

Group Photo

None of us is really smiling; we are all
too clever for that. We lucky students,
chosen to spend a weekend with three real poets,
are all standing on the Jeffersonian steps
of some academic hall and trying to look
as if we belong there. I am on the front row
in my black dress. Of course, a black dress.
Two rows behind me stands the poet who,
after the flash, walked up and ran his hand
down my backbone, saying, “What I want
is a picture of your back, with all that hair
flowing down.” In the picture I have hung
above my desk, he is not looking at my hair
but at the camera, like the rest of us.
When he mailed his book with an inscription
hinting at intimacies never made,
I felt his hand again, tracing the spill
of hair down my back, writing on my spine.

Gentle

Bluegrass blurred with interstate gray, colors lost
at eighty-five, until a monarch butterfly
smacked into my windshield
and lodged there. It was almost funny to hit
something so small and lovely, more idea
than animal. I switched on the wipers, envisioning
a gentle release, but it swung back and forth.
Wondering about the pain the insects feel,
hoping it wasn't much, I watched it drag
an arching, orange smear across the glass
for a full minute before pulling over.
What was the greater kindness now?
As a child I was told not to touch the wings,
for the scales like fairy dust on my fingertips
kept the butterfly from crumbling into flame.
Can't you see the fire, my father asked,
the orange burning into black?
And what was the greater kindness now,
the slow smolder or the high-kindled blaze?

Describing Deer, Grazing in a Park, to a Blind Woman in Sewanee, Tennessee

There are three of them, two does and a fawn.
They stand in the shade, nibbling at the grass,
angling their heads to watch us while they eat.

Does? They're smaller than bucks, no antlers.
The fawn is even smaller, not much bigger
than your dog. It's golden brown like caramel
with white spots in rows on its flanks.

Brown? It's the smell of dirt in your garden
on hot afternoons. Gold is the sound
of cymbals clashing. White is empty and clean; it can be beautiful
or terrifying, hot or cold, and it smells and tastes like ice.

The does eat cautiously, never taking their eyes
from us, even as they curve their necks
to the grass. The fawn fearlessly between the does,
careless of motherhood. Its uncertain hooves
are blurred with tender green.

But the words are only metaphors;
I can't spell for you their color, their grace,

the simple wonder of deer in a park.

Language is a crutch. Lean on it

with all our weight, as much as it can bear.

Monday, Waiting

A glance at the calendar whispers a plan—
what day would be most convenient for a funeral?
Since Saturday he's been lying—
it's a wishful cliche to say fighting—
in a hospital bed, weighing a coronary
against the remainder of his life.
I have a sort of habitual love for my grandfather,
a welder, who showed me the bridges and dams he built,
who misspelled my name on every card or gift
he ever sent, who gripped the pen in his fist
as if to prevent its escape, who sealed my birthday cards
in envelopes addressed to my sister, but lately
has mailed short letters with money orders tucked inside.
We hope your doing fine. Your Dad says your scool
is going good. Come see us when you get the chanse.

He sent those cards and letters
knowing that the words were wrong, knowing
that I would know. If he lacked the fire to bend
the words, to twist and beat them into meaningful shapes,
at least he ended each with *love,*
one word he could always spell.

Notes Toward an Ars Poetica

A woman wakes. She rises, almost trips
over the cat entwined around her ankles.
The kitty mimics the percolator's drone.
The news recites the morning's catalog:
disasters from other hemispheres, the same
from hers, its housefires, earthquakes, names of the dead.

She showers, dresses, scrapes the early frost
from her windshield. Passing homes she can't afford,
she plans her day, the errands and household tasks.
A squirrel bounds into the road and freezes,
paralyzed between a forward flight
and retreat. She brakes and waits for it to choose.

In Produce, shaking water off bunches of kale,
she notes the price and smiles. "The kale's on sale,"
she whispers. A black woman tears a bag
from the spool and thumbs the plastic open, grins
and says, "Well, this must be our Christmas present!"

Selection is a kind of joy. She finds
a satisfaction, almost luxury,

in this bunch of scallions over that,
each box or can. There are no synonyms
among the brands; each carrot or garlic bulb
reveals to her its subtle properties.

And when the retarded bagboy drifts away
to follow the calls that only he can hear,
she steps around the cart and takes his place.
She keeps her eyes on her hands, tries not to stare
at the bagboy staring back across the store.

That night, at home, the kitchen's poetry
awakens. Her heavy German knife is lovely
in her practiced hand. She often cuts herself,
but not tonight. The recipe instructs
a basil chiffonade, and she repeats
the word in rhythm with the rocking blade.

And everything—everything!—must
be tasted—the onions roasting in vinegar,
the pot of cream and wine simmering
with whole vanilla beans, the mushrooms, soft
and lush with butter. The flavors strike and meld,

the salt and spice, the alchemy of food.

But finally she has to deal with this,
the bitter heart of her creation, a lobster
stirring on the board. She bends to snip
the rubber bands around its claws and stops.
The recipe instructs the chef to drive the knife
between the flimsy plates behind its head,

rip off the tail and tear the claws away.
But should she ice it down to numb it first?
Or would the boiling water, just enough
to kindly kill it, change the taste so much?
The lobster shivers, slowly tries to walk.
How far will it get before she can decide?

The knife is balanced in her hand, and knows
it was made for cutting. Each decision counts.

Convergence at the Krispy Kreme

A large coffee and two glazed, hot off the conveyor
and glistening with sugar, cost $2.40.
I'm stirring in cream with a too-short straw,
trying not to burn my fingers, when two Canada geese
saunter past the window. Their curved bodies,
black and gray, balance on graceless feet.
How many vertebra join in swiveling,
pivoting necks, spelling S, 2, 7, C,
beautiful lines not meant to be read?
The morning commuters steer around them,
easing from the drive-thru, one hand on the wheel,
one holding coffee, glazed and lemon-filled
resting in their laps, all eyes on the geese.
In the parking lot sit five more, and the man
who bought a box of crullers says,
"I don't know what those ducks think they're doing,"
and looks like he's never been happier.
My coffee steams through its slotted lid.
We've all never been happier.

To a Five-Cent Package of Writing Paper

You were my father's Christmas present that year
when all the children in his grade school class
drew names, and all the children but one--
the boy who had drawn my father--brought their gifts.
When the teacher realized they were short,
she rifled her desk for something a boy might like.
All she came up with was you. It was then,
as he fingered the band that held you together,
that my father knew he was poor.

My sister and I were overcome with gifts
we could not name and whose uses he had to explain--
a boomerang, ring puzzles, a green-smelling bamboo flute.
He told me this story on one of those rare occasions
when he felt he could trust me, late at night,
a glass of scotch in his hand.
This is his gift to me: another's history
and shame, the wretchedness of wealth.

September Waning

Days like today are already gone.
Barefoot, lounging in shorts I'd given up
for the season, I sun on the porch, reading
or not reading, glancing up at the whistles
of coal barges sliding past, pulling the river behind them
like ribbons of taffy. The lizards, too,
have returned, skittering up and down the rails,
sunning themselves like tiny crocodiles.
Even this one, with her tail regrowing
from a stub, could be a glorious monster.
The sun is too hot—my eastward side taking the brunt
of heat and UV's and God knows what else—
but it's nearly October. Already the lizards
are digging winter burrows under the Bradford pear,
and my husband is inside, napping under a blanket.
I taste woodsmoke hanging in the air,
and pull a coil of hair over my reddening ear,
breathing deep the sweet shampoo and oils
the day has reawakened.

Haircuttings

It’s impossible

to get them off

by brushing,

so I blow,

lip to lobe,

into his ear,

my breath

rushing

through nautilus

curves, whistling

past his ear drum

and giving

the tiny

balance bones

a shiver,

down the line

of his jaw

into his throat,

spiraling past

the breathing and beating

to blossom,

finally,

in the box of his hips

like a warm spill

of music

charging

his body.

“Ooo,” he says.

“Oooh,” I breathe back.

Trails

I almost missed it—the wild flash
of the deer's back as it bolted
from a hidden spot beside the trail—
thinking, that will teach me to be talking
instead of looking in such a place.

Like when I was a child camping
on Mount Cheaha, and followed a fawn
to a grassless circle where it lay
beside half a dozen others, watching me.
She's all right, they told each other,
she is a deer, too. I cannot be sure now
that this was not a dream. But since then
I have been a deer, though sometimes I forget.

Metropolis

It's hard to locate our yellow sun without shadows
to point the way, hard to tell if the sky has always been
this high and unclouded, this bluer than blue. Our buildings,
tall and clean, line the streets like proud, protective mothers.

Repairs continue on the First Metropolis Bank,
its vault floor chewed to rubble by the giant drill
that burrowed up from the sewers, its rear wall smashed by rescue.
The tellers flush as they count out spotless bills;
the manager practices his anecdote. Underground, concrete pours
like honey, and masons grin behind their trowels.

New asphalt glitters under our feet, glazing over the narrow fissures
from when the city was shrunk and corked in a bottle
last winter. It wasn't that different, being shrunk.
We only noticed when the wind stopped blowing.

And there, high above us, The Daily Planet!
The banner rings the great bronze ball, askew on its axis,
torn from its rooftop orbit a hundred times, a thousand,
to be hurled at the citizens below, ripped up and wielded again and again,
the gun on the mantel, a set piece that must be used, but caught,

gently, every time, and heat-vision welded back into place.

Lois is in the art museum. Lois is at the shipyards. Lois
is in the abandoned warehouse, listening from high in the rafters.
Lois is tied to a railroad track, trapped inside a burning house,
driving unaware of the bomb in her trunk—she's losing her grip
on the rope, the vine, the rock—she's calling for help
as one backstrap heel tumbles like fruit to the ground.

Look! Up in the sky!
There's nothing to see, but we look, craning our necks
on faith, waiting for that firm rush of air, pressure on our ears,
a streak in the sky that seems bluer than bluer than blue.

The Kindest Way to Kill a Lobster

Snip the bitter bands that hold his claws;

let him roam free on your countertop.

Stroke the plate between his eyestalks.

When he walks, his tail strikes the cutting board

like a conductor's baton. Listen to his music.

While he still half-dreams in refrigerated sleep,

return him to the churning brine he used to know,

to spread the fronds of his tail again,

if only for a moment, swimming until

the whole of his body blushes and bends.

Feasting

In Alabama we joke that possums
are born dead on a highway. In truth,
they're slow and stupid, drawn by the stink
of what's already dead, a cat or squirrel
or another cannibal possum,
crushed and melting to grease in the sun.
One carcass spawns many,
and my swervings grow wilder until I drive
like a drunk to avoid their bones.

Possum eats dog eats coon eats rat,
and crow eats them all.
When my swooping lights catch them
at their feasts, my eyes meet theirs,
red-reflected, and I have to guess in a second
which way they will run. I twist
the wheel, brace for the thump,
check all the mirrors for a shape
humping into the grass or lying still.
The next day, the crows, ripping
and gorging, wait until the last instant
to flutter gracelessly away,

already returning as I pass.

The Whiteness of the Whale

The important thing to remember
is that it didn't exist,
nothing to lay hands on
deep in the blubber.
The fish was no more evil
than any bloated moon
or hill of snow,
no more than Patina Carr,
who in the fourth grade
accused me of stealing her pencil,
who pretended to cry
when I wouldn't give it to her,
who called me names at recess.
I grabbed a rock as big as my fist
and chased her with blood in my mouth
until she hid behind a teacher I loved.
I lowered the rock
but raised it again when she moved
into the clear. I could hear
the damp crunch of her cheekbones
even as the teacher took my rock away.
When Patina moved to Washington,

I knew it was because of me.

She was afraid.

I would have hurt her

as badly as I could,

one truth that I alone

remain to tell.

Moment

Through morning fog drifting to shore
as if from a fire on the other side,
I saw a bird whose name, *sandhill crane,*
appeared in my mouth like a ghost.

A brushstroke inked on rice paper,
scented with jasmine tea, the crane posed
like an S in the gray light,
its unimagined feet lost in the water.
It did not look at me, but at the river
pooled around its tapered legs,
carrying its reflection back to Savannah,
Honshu, a black drop in a brush,
the country of its birth.

Chickenhouse

The smell of sun-baked manure drifts across
the interstate and into my car.
I used to love that richness, the scent
of my grandparents' farm in long shadeless summers.
I followed my grandfather to his chickenhouse
for the thrilling job of collecting eggs:
standing at the conveyor belt,
wiping fly specks off warm eggs, settling
them points-up in flats. He'd pay me with pocket change
and drive to a farm, where he threw the day's
heat-smothered birds to pigs. Bone, feathers,
beaks, all went down their greedy throats.
A few years later he shot his wife.
This Tennessee breeze brings back
the great metal fans at both ends of the hothouse,
blowing dirty feathers in the air.

Glass

A tiny kitchen, little space, and then
the simple act of stacking dishes turns
into a symphony of clanking glass:
a salad bowl collides with a ketchup bottle,
which tumbles onto the row of just-washed
martini glasses, and into the brimming sink.
And somehow, nothing breaks. My husband calls
from the living room sofa, “Are you okay?”
Which means, “Did you break anything?”
Which means, “You better not break my shit, bitch.”
He sits there, doesn’t even turn to look.
It’s just another crashing, brittle echo,
imagined, half-remembered, another glass
that shakes with its potential, that hears its ring.

Bottle Imp

The old apocalypse returns, recast
in modern forms: the smallpox virus coaxed
from Bangladeshi scabs and nurtured till
it fills its inch-long vials like ruined milk.

Does this feel familiar? Recognize it yet?
The virus, yes, but also the packaging,
the hackneyed bit about the genie trapped
inside the bottle-- get the image now?

Familiar, yes, but it's meant to be. How else
are we supposed to know? Identify
refrigerated warheads by their skewed
trajectories, their top-heavy loll.

Identify the symptoms not by aches
and fever, not by pustules blooming red
as poppies, the skin's deliberate levitation
above the lower dermis-- not by these,

but by the dreams which come before. The mind,
another genie, apprehends its fate

before the body registers a twinge,
and signals this in nightmares, images

of vague and crushing horror, indistinct
like dreams of infants overcome with sound
and heat and terrifying color-- the signs
of one world ending, the next one looming dark.

But back to genies, the western term for djinn,
the demons roaming Arab wilderness
and desert, evil things which might allow
magicians to command them for a time--

invisible, they took the shape of bird
or beast or man, whatever suited them--
a flea or viral corkscrew-- each of these
was in their power, nestled deep in sand.

Lesson

I am learning sign from the deaf boy
in the mall cafeteria.
He works the dishroom, I work the register.
Tonight as the clock neared eight, he urged
the manager to lock up early, and so
taught me a new one, “close.”
He held his arms in front of his body, palms up,
as if waiting to receive something heavy;
then his hands arched upward and together
like a sketch of birds’ wings, turning
knuckle to knuckle at their apex, resting
level with his breastbone: close.

I don’t know if the same sign could be used
for the adjective “closed,” but I think of
my grandmother now as I didn’t see her then.
The bullets her husband put in her face
sealed her funeral coffin,
and I had to imagine her through the wood.
When we heard her killer and husband
had died in prison, my mother said “Thank God,”
and I didn’t say anything. Now my hands

make two arches, come together, and rest.

Bird, Smoke, Crystal, Bone

I.

The last December sunlight falls on these crows,
some four and twenty blackbirds scrabbling on snow,
their muddied beaks devouring crusts I'd left
for robins. Seen this close, through plate glass doors,
they're huge, as big as cats. The light won't shine,
reddened, from their black eyes. They bob their heads
obscenely till the chunks of bread go down.

Is there some augury in scavengers
who swerved from their nightly flight across the river
to roost in a Cincinnati graveyard, just
to steal the food of songbirds? Groups of crows
are called murders; rooks, a parliament.
Their cuneiform tracks reveal to the snow
its own defilement, rain that fell so soft
on gravestones, a drowning sailor's would-be breath,
the other incarnations of waters past.
Will I be able to read it? Ice has glazed
the snow beyond soft powder to crunching chunks
that break resentfully under my boots. The crows
have left behind a feather, its rachis hot—

what bloody story would it tell for me?
Perhaps the truth for bread; perhaps a lie,
being crows. The bread wasn't mine, this house
not mine. The crows know they owe me nothing.

II.

This book I've pulled from a stranger's shelf,
an old, no doubt expensive leather-bound
on witchcraft, neglects to mention New Year's Eve,
which seems an oversight. It's understood—
if only in the dour modern sense—
that this night is something magical.
Anticipation charges the air, the news,
and even the owners of this house have flown
to someplace elsewhere, better, to celebrate
in style. Their dog and I have gone through our
routines—just one more icy walk before
we call it a night. And in the meantime, this:
a few portentous hours to fill, to kill,
with pages falling open on their own,
the weight of print and plates and fissured spine
selecting for me passages to read,
a scattered history in bones and ash.

III.

The Romans favored augury, the tales
interpreted from flights of noble birds,
and gently unwound the shrouded blueprints of fate
from bulging entrails of sacrificed bulls.
(They called this art haruspicy—each art,
however dark, must have an honest name.)
The Druids read the death throes of victims bled
on sacred stones, and then, like Romans, turned
to viscera. Somewhere in those heavy coils,
the Druid and Roman priests divined each other,
the sacred groves destroyed, and Rome supreme—
and yet the Druids fought, their women and men
in holy black and blood-stained robes dead
and dying, their final prophecies fulfilled.

IV.

Such things are never easy. The smoke that curls
from sacred fires doesn't write itself
in English, won't spell out a word or name.
We look instead for faces, ashy ghosts

of war or love or fortune. Read them quickly,

before the wind can tear their shapes apart.

V.

Begin with artifacts, protected now

by inch-thick glass and velvet, under guard

at the British Museum. The book describes a slab

of rock, obsidian, and a crystal egg.

From this, take history: Hernan Cortes

at sail from savage Veracruz at last,

the mirror rock among his cargo of gold,

another trinket passed around at court

and later sent to woo the English bitch,

Elizabeth. Through her it came to Dee,

the court astrologer, an earnest man

who recognized his limits. He used

his Aztec magic glass for scrying, gazed

within its polished world until he found

some meaning, something to report to his Queen.

Dee knew he was no psychic, but kept his faith

in magic, even when his partner claimed

Madimi, the spirit from the crystal egg,

had ordered him and Dee to share their wives.

He trusted even this man, a charlatan
who'd lost his ears for forgery. They shared
reluctant wives, then broke their partnership.
Dee retired to his Mortlake house,
where enemies had burned or stolen books
and most of his scientific instruments.
His wife and daughter, Madimi, died of plague.
From his collection, three thousand books—
the *Stenographia,* Dee's response
the *Monas Hieroglyphia*—survived,
but only for display beside the egg
and clouded mirror, which, as Dee grew old
and destitute, and Elizabeth in her tomb,
would give him nothing but tricks of dimming light
and the meager-blossomed mist of his breath on stone.

VI.

Perhaps the girls discovered her at prayer--
exciting chants in the pantry's musty dark,
a pinch of flour on the fetish's leering mouth--
and threatened to tell the Reverend; perhaps
she led them willingly. Or Ann, the sole
surviving Putnam child, begged her help

to reach the children her mother still mourned.
Whatever the beginning, the end was this:
as Tituba cracked the egg in her hand, the yolk
held back in practiced fingers, and dropped the white
in a glass of swirling water, Abigail
and Ann and all the other Salem girls
leaned toward the future. Holding hands,
they studied the twisting proteins for signs
of husbands' occupations-- Bible, plow,
or gavel.

Tituba stood above them, lost
within the spell as coming months uncoiled:
the girls in fits, the Reverend's righteous fists,
confession of desperate lies, then thirteen months
of prison, chained to hold her spectre down—
awake in darkness, never again to see
Barbados—somehow saved from hanging, saved
for sale to a new master, seven pounds
to cover prison costs. Her history ends—
albumen settled on the bottom of the glass,
the yolk still dripped from Tituba's shaking hand.
The girls were waiting for more amusement. Now,

what choice but to conjure devils and confess?

VII.

The sun is down, the windows turned to mirrors
with the city lights behind. Myopic dots
of headlights trace the river, sweeping beams
of coal barges arching toward the shore.
The jingle of Gilda's collar carries down
the stairs to me, and the click of her nails like glass
on darkened tiles, the small noises of dogs
She won't come down to watch TV with me.
She doesn't share my bourgeois tastes, is bored
by channel surfing (even though I skip
the Times Square revelry repeatedly);
perhaps she can't abide these late-night reels
of skin and cops and endless MASH repeats,
and psychics selling a glimpse of future fate.
They grin and sweat for authenticity,
parading testimonials of girls
in groups, ethnic and just a little trampy,
at malls and movie theaters, swearing truths:
My psychic said my grandma raised me—how
could she have known? She said my husband cheated,

and she was right. She knew my mother's name

was Frances.

Is this their only offering,

a confirmation of the past? A cheap

biography of lying men, bad jobs,

forgotten family and ruin, a voice

to understand, to say that fate absolves

their failures, empty flattery for sale

in prophecy's voice? The Sibyls never cared

to be loved. Entranced by smoke of green limbs,

burning moly twisted with hair, the women

spoke Apollo's words through raptured mouths

regardless of what the seeker wished to hear.

When summoned, the witch at Cumae left her cave

and offered nine oracular volumes bound

with grape and olive vine, but Tarquinus Superbus,

the final king of Rome, refused her price.

She burned three volumes—still he would not pay.

She burned three more, and the king surrendered all

the fortune she had asked for the final three.

Tarquinus Superbus—had he paid her price

at first, we might still recognize his name.

VIII.

Were we so different from those Salem girls,
my sister and I, asleep on Valentine's eve
with bay leaves from mother's spice rack tucked beneath
our pillows? Laurel leaves brought dreams of love,
a future husband's face; or cast a spell
so in the morning the first boy we saw
would be the one. Or rose petals, laid
on next year's pillows, also conjuring dreams
or spells-- the books all disagreed. No dreams
of any notice came, and we forgot
our magics till the next night, discovering
the talismans in pieces in our beds.

IX.

Imagine Tituba and John Dee,
an ocean and a century between them.
Imagine them together, not in Salem
or Mortlake, but in a conjured space outside
of time and death. Barbados's umber eye
meets England's bloodshot blue, and they know themselves:
two believers ruined by their belief.
There's no need to speak or touch, but they touch,

lightly, fingertips and parted lips.
Each mirrors the other's fate, or what
they thought was fate. They feel themselves as twins,
conjoined by destiny or foolishness,
or both. Such anguished recognition is worse
than death, or the memory of death, of life
and cunning magics. It almost feels like love.

X.

I don't know why I picked this musty book
from all these shelves, rows of masterpieces
I've always meant to read. I'm sure its owners
never cracked the spine. By now they're deep
in canapes and Dom Perignon,
while I must mind the dog, mind the house,
take a message if anybody calls.
I'm casting deep in England, Salem, Rome.
The slow river below my borrowed view—
could that be the Tiber? Or the Thames?
Could those city lights be priestly fires?
Is pretense, a vain escape from loneliness
and lonely heart, as damning as belief?

XI.

And this, mundane until the passing of years
casts mystery over the unmysterious:
an earache. Halfway through Sousa, fingers banging
the keys to fake a difficult run, it hit,
like sudden lightning over the ocean's end.
I begged off band rehearsal and fled to the car,
not minding the heat, the leather smell
grown rank in sunshine, holding my head still.
Halfway home it vanished.

So, an earache.

Why this longing to read it as an omen?
Is every spotty morning nosebleed filled
with weighty portents? Should I analyze
the stubbings of my toes? The question that sets
imaginations wandering is the soft
and whispered "what if"—the threat of hazy change,
the interventions of sly devils and gods.
A word, an image, twenty year-old names,
and the mind begins its automatic game
of speculation, guessing at the lady
or tiger curled behind the sliding doors,
a different turn in a hallway, missing that flight,

a high school band rehearsal, steady flute
upheld so level, throwing back the sun,
and what on the other side? A car wreck?
A tumble down the concrete stairs? A jab
at a pudgy saxophonist that ruins her day,
provokes a binge that adds another five
contemptible pounds, depression during college,
and suicide at twenty-one? Because
my sudden earache might not have been meant
for me, or her, or anything at all.

XII.

This last poor divination into the past
must lie in memory without a name,
or none that I can find. My thumbworn book
is filled with empty words: haruspicy
from entrails, augury from flights of birds,
the Tarot, palmistry and scrying glass.
The necromancer's future is found in death,
the numerologist's in holy math,
the tasseomancer's in leaves of drunken tea.
And mine? Tonight, already morning's cusp
and the new year's darkling dawn, the best

and last I have is stichomancy, the search
for fateful meaning in random pages of books.
The future's a glossary of Latin roots.

I have the benefit of history.
I see the court astrologer at work
on charts or spells, and call him a fool.
I pity Tituba her slavery,
but not her fate. The final king of Rome
may rest uneasy in Hell, regretting not
his prudence but his sudden, fearful glut.
Perhaps the demons, who relish irony,
explain the portents of their own warm guts
to eviscerated Roman and Druid priests.
Or Hell is just another prophecy,
unfounded as the rest, and all the dead
are less than dust. But I am still alive,
and cannot find myself on any page,
no hint of future, past, or present course,
no portents, omens, harbingers of life
or love, career or death in the new year.
There's nothing—or everything, too many signs
to read, interpretation overwhelmed

by meaning that swoops and swirls through every word
and image—bleeding roadkill, shapes in clouds,
a random, channel-surfing sentence voiced
by twenty throats.

The dog upstairs can't rest;
her collar jingles down to me. I climb
the spiral steps and find her waiting there;
she noses my palm. Before the window's view
we sit, her bearish head in my lap, and watch
the lights wink out and fade on either side
of the black and still Ohio. The night gives way
to utter dark, and the sun is slow to rise.

Beholding Nothing: Wallace Stevens's Paradox of the Imagination
in "The Snow Man" and "The Plain Sense of Things"

Of all the major American poets of the twentieth century, Wallace Stevens is perhaps the most concerned with the inner workings and larger thematic scope of poetry itself. From his first book *Harmonium,* published in 1923, to his last, *The Rock,* published in 1954, Stevens wrestled with the debt owed by modern poets to their romantic predecessors and the unsuitability of romantic techniques for poetry of the postwar twentieth century. As Michael Davidson notes, Stevens was interested in the "treatment of language as a system—its acoustics, its syntax, its pragmatics—in dramatizing ideas" (149). The paradox of using the act of writing, through the metaphor of poetry, to disclose truth undisguised by metaphor ("the thing itself") troubled Stevens throughout his career, and he attempted to address the problem both in his essays, letters and poetry. One of the earliest poems to deal with this paradox is "The Snow Man," in *Harmonium.* Though many critics (including such notaries as Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom and Michel Benamou) view this early poem as one of Stevens's most perfect expressions of the paradox of imagination and perception, Stevens was not content to let that poem stand alone for his thoughts on the subject. He would return to that crucial paradox many times during his career, in poems including "How to Live. What to Do," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Study of Two Pears," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "Credences of Summer," "The Auroras of Autumn," and many others. Two poems that serve as bookends of Stevens's thoughts on the imaginative paradox are "The Snow Man," Stevens's early expression of the need to see "things as they are," and *The Rock*'s "The Plain Sense of Things." While it is easy to make connections among many of Stevens's poems, I read this late work as the most direct descendant of "The Snow Man." While many of its themes and modes of expression are the same as or similar to

those of the earlier poem, the maturity of Stevens's ideas and his acknowledgement of the impossibility of the paradox are apparent in "The Plain Sense of Things," making it at once a more oblique and more self-reflective poem than its often-anthologized predecessor.

As many critics have noted, Stevens's prose holds many keys to unlocking his poetry. In his 1954 essay "On Poetic Truth," Stevens articulates many of his ideas on the nature of poetry, its relation to reality and truth, and the poet as artist. Since the days of Plato, Stevens writes, we have learned

> that poetry has to do with reality in that concrete and individual aspect of it which the mind can never tackle altogether on its own terms, with matter that is foreign and alien in a way in which abstract systems, ideas in which we detect an inherent pattern, a structure that belongs to the ideas themselves, can never be. It is never familiar to us the way in which Plato wished the conquests of the mind to be familiar. On the contrary its function, the need which it meets and which has to be met in some way in every age that is not to become decadent or barbarous is precisely this contact with reality as it impinges on us from the outside, the sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our minds. (*OP* 236-37).

Though written late in his career, the poetic project articulated here had preoccupied Stevens for many years. The goal of approaching reality or a kind of abstract truth, without the obfuscation of metaphor, began with the poems in *Harmonium* and persisted throughout his career, though his techniques and attitudes would mature over time. But in the end, the goal of the poet artist, Stevens writes, is to uncover the "unity rooted in the

individuality of objects and discovered in a different way from the apprehension of rational connections."

This dictum clearly applies to "The Snow Man" and "The Plain Sense of Things." A great deal has been written on these works[1], and I will address many of the more

[1] If I fail to discuss a particular theoretical perspective or reading of a poem, the omission is not based so much on validity, as on relevance to the issue at hand. An example is Stevens's use of intertextuality; though fascinating, this modernist technique is not germane to my argument here. Many critics have already explicated this layering of Stevens's technique, allusions and meaning. For "The Snow Man" alone, critics read a staggering variety of intertexts: Helen Vendler sees Keats's "In Drear-Nighted December" between Stevens's lines; Harold Bloom reads Emerson's transparent eyeball; William Bevis argues that the poem is a Buddhist meditation; and other intertexts as varied as Nietzsche, Wordsworth, Schelegel, Mallarme and Yeats have been seen in Stevens's poetry. Many of these intertextual readings are convincing; there seems no question that Nietzsche and Emerson were strong influences on not only "The Snow Man" but on much of Stevens's early poetry; likewise, we may assume that Stevens must have studied Keats as part of his meditations on the rejection of romanticism. But regardless of their validity, these arguments do not bear a great deal of relevance to my analysis of "The Snow Man" and "The Plain Sense of Things" as poetic counterparts. Rather, it is Stevens's intratextuality—his poems' self-referentiality and the recurrence of images, language, themes and problems—that is at issue. Therefore I will focus as closely as possible on the texts of the poems themselves, without wandering into sidebars of theoretical interpretation that may or may not be entirely relevant.

powerful and relevant interpretations, beginning with Helen Vendler. In *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire,* Vendler writes that Stevens "conceived of himself as a poet of winter—of the moment when illusion has ceased" (36). Nowhere is the "mind of winter" more apparent than in the 1923 poem "The Snow Man." In this deceptively simple poem composed of a single sentence, Stevens expresses one of the primary tenets of his poetic project—that one must approach reality objectively, without the taint of human perceptions, in order to see a thing for what it really is:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (*CP* 9-10)

In this poem, as in most of Stevens's works, there is no first person "I" speaker; instead there is a "one" who by the end of the poem has been transformed into the "listener," the inhuman snow man. The speaker describes a winter landscape with which "one must" unite oneself in order to understand the "nothing" of the scene and not to impose one's own emotions or perceptions upon it. As many critics have pointed out, the

"one" or snow man himself is a paradox. Bloom questions how "the beholder [can] possess 'nothing,' in a positive sense of seeing-with-amazement" (62). Vendler writes that the poem "attempts the amnesia of nature, an impossible task" (47). For David R. Jarraway, the poem suggests a "bereft . . . world demythologized to the point of purposeless chaos," a world of "bleakness and waste" (30, 195). Davidson sees in the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" a "linguistic equivalent to a paradox for which images are entirely inadequate" (149). How can a speaker capable of beholding the scene and listening to "the sound of the land" that blows through the last three stanzas be "nothing himself"? Must the "attempt to numb, while not annihilating, the senses—to continue to see and hear without admitting misery and loss," as Vendler writes, also be an annihilation of the self?

Stevens says that it must. This emphatic adverb carries the weight of the first line's imperative and echoes in each verb through the break indicated by the semicolon after the "January sun" in the third stanza. If the listener is to be successful in perceiving his surroundings without imposing human emotions upon them, he "must" obey Stevens's directive; he has no choice. With this single stroke of diction Stevens transforms this seemingly remote poem of meditation, into a command, which the listener must heed, or fail. Stevens, in this early poem, is convinced of the rightness of his answer to the problem of imagination and perception. This conviction will waver later in his career, and in "The Plain Sense of Things" will reveal an ambiguity and uncertainty in Stevens's statement of his poetic project.

Before delving into the perceptions and limitations of the snow man, we must investigate the landscape he observes. The statement at the end of the poem, that the

scene consists of "nothing," belies the descriptions of the full, almost lush winter landscape in the beginning of the poem. This landscape is not merely a scene of blank whiteness. The snow man looks upon a vista of "boughs/ Of the pine-trees crusted with snow" and "junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter/ Of the January sun." This scene is not dead; indeed, Stevens makes a point of giving the trees not only specific species names, but the names of evergreens. Life (not "purposeless chaos," as Jarraway asserts) animates the scene; green flashes beneath the whiteness, and the "January sun," though distant, glitters its brightness across the vista. Vendler states that the layering of snow over the branches "gives his pines and junipers a double foliage" (48), with snow and ice doubling the living trees, rather than killing or concealing them.

Rather abruptly, Stevens retreats from the precise descriptions of the first half of the poem to the abstractions of the second half. Like Anthony Whiting in *The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens' Romantic Irony,* when I speak of dividing the poem into halves I am referring to the break that occurs in the first line of the third stanza, at the semicolon after "January sun." Although this is not quite the true halfway point of the poem, only the seventh line of the fifteen-line poem, it is the turning point at which the speaker shifts from telling the snow man what he must do, to what he must not do. In the first half the snow man "must have a mind of winter" and must "have been cold a long time" to regard the scene as he should. In the second half, the speaker emphasizes that the snow man must have followed the above directions in order "not to think/ Of any misery in the sound of the wind," or not to think at all. The negation of the second half

builds until the snow man is revealed in the last stanza as "nothing" within a landscape of nothing.

Along with the negation of action and identity in the second half of "The Snow Man" comes a sudden absence of specificity. "[J]unipers shagged with ice" become "a few leaves" in which there blows "the sound of the wind." At the same time the mind of the snow man becomes more blank and closer to the ideal of "nothing," so the language of the poem more closely approaches "nothing." Properly speaking, "leaves" is not even the correct word, since these three evergreen species all bear needles. Thirty years later in "The Plain Sense of Things," Stevens would use "leaves" both as a simplification of the life of the vegetative world and also as a kind of pun for his own writing. In "The Snow Man," the stripped-down diction of the leaves and the sound in the second half of the poem creates a metapoetical mirror for the increasing blankness of the mind of the snow man beholding "nothing."

In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate,* Harold Bloom sees this characteristic poetic as evidence of Stevens's "goal of reductiveness," his "First Idea" (48). which Bloom says "enters his poetry" in "The Snow Man" (48).

> . . . [T]he need to get down to a First Idea seems always to have inhered in Stevens' consciousness. He does not name the First Idea as such until he writes *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* in 1942, but *Harmonium* contains the notion and process without the name. The root meaning of "first" is "forward" or "early," and the root meaning of "idea" is "to see." We might say that a First Idea always involves priority, "to see earliest," which makes it a necessity for a

> poet like Stevens, who could not tolerate any sensation of belatedness and who refused to acknowledge the influence of any predecessors. (42)

Bloom asserts that this "First Idea" "enters [Stevens's] poetry" in "The Snow Man," which lays the blueprint for the "First Idea's" poetic formula (48). He argues that the formula breaks down into three parts: "One must have a mind of winter, or reduce to the First Idea; one must discover that to live with the First Idea alone is not to be human; one must reimagine the First Idea" (1). How successful Bloom is at applying his own formula to "The Snow Man" is a matter of some debate. William B. Bevis in *Mind of Winter* attacks Bloom's assertion that "the listener, reduced to nothing, remains human because he beholds something shagged and rough, barely figurative, yet still a figuration rather than a bareness" (Bloom 63). Bevis argues that the "'shagged' and 'rough' are *not* still there at the end; nothing is" (231). Bevis also disputes Bloom's claim that Stevens's own explanation of "The Snow Man" is "the worst reading possible" (Bloom 63), and accuses Bloom of "rid[ing] over" Stevens's explanation "in order to locate bareness early in the poem, and then make the end positive" (Bevis 231).

While neither critic is entirely persuasive, Bevis is entirely correct that Bloom has gone to somewhat extreme lengths to make "The Snow Man" fit his own formula rather than Stevens's explanation. In a 1944 letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explained that the poem was "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (*Letters* 464). Yet Bloom is also correct in identifying the poem as a poem of reduction. It does seem, however, that Bloom misreads the poem in that he sees it as a single piece, rather than a kind of before-and-after depiction of a change in consciousness and perception. The first half of the poem, as explicated above,

is rich and full with descriptive details. Only in the second half of the poem does the idea begin to reduce itself, whittling itself down until at the poem's end only "nothing" is left.

As Whiting writes, "the first reduction in ['The Snow Man'] is the removal of the language with which the mind has beautifully decorated the winter scene" (169-70). One can see the reduction not only in the paring down of the landscape—junipers, spruces and pine trees become "leaves"—but also in the sheer number of words Stevens uses in each section. In the first "half" of the poem, the opening six-and-a-half lines, Stevens uses thirty-three different words; in the last eight-and-a-half lines, he uses only twenty-two new words. Indeed, the last stanza introduces only five new words, and the final line of the poem includes only one word, "there," that has not already been used. This is a double reduction, both in content and in language, which reflects both Bloom's notion of the First Idea and Vendler's concept of Stevens as a minimalist (Vendler 37). Whiting also asserts that "the movement in 'The Snow Man' from a visual mode to an aural one" in leaving behind the specific visual descriptions in favor of the abstract "sound of the wind," "signals a further reduction of the mind's presence in the landscape" (62). As the senses of the snow man are less involved in the scene around him, he becomes more successful in "not thinking" of the significance or emotional metaphors of the scene. The bookends of the poem, the emphatic "must" of the first line and the equally firm "nothing" of the last, leave the snow man—and the reader—little room for deviation. This shedding of the senses and emotion is absolutely necessary, says Stevens, in order to comprehend the scope and true nature of reality.

In 1954, thirty years after *Harmonium,* Stevens published his last collection of poems, *The Rock.* Stevens writes even more directly than previously on the subject of

poetry. Many of these poems convey a feeling of dejection, which can be attributed to some extent to the aging poet's sense of his mortality and his resultant "intense meditation on last things," as Jarraway suggests (252). But the poet's intellect was still engaged in the epistemological challenges that he had been grappling with for many years. Only now, the poems acknowledge the failure of the impossible task Stevens had set for himself. "The Plain Sense of Things" returns to the intellectual problem presented by "The Snow Man," but admits that the absolute "mind of winter" that disallows metaphor is an impossibility. Also in this poem, the images and themes of "The Snow Man" return in altered form and with more mature interpretations, yet with some of the same optimism that the imagination and human perception might indeed be reconciled.

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflection, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires. (*CP* 502)

Like "The Snow Man," this poem does not use an "I" speaker; but instead of the remote "one" of the earlier poem, Stevens here brings his reader closer by speaking through a "we," enfolding both himself and the reader. The poem is careful to hold its reader at arm's length, however. The "we" disappears after the first stanza, and the reader is left only with impersonal description and interpretation. And indeed, in this scene the reader is at best a visitor and at worst an intruder; the "great structure" decayed to "a minor house" is in many ways a private scene reflecting the failure of Stevens's poetic ideology.

Frank Kermode's essay on "The Plain Sense of Things" sets the standard for interpretation of this poem, and others, as meditations on the metaphoric nature of language, and the challenge that the poet faces:

> In its own very idiosyncratic way that meditation echoes a central theme of modern philosophy. The plain sense is itself metaphorical; there is no escape from metaphor; univocity in language is no more than a dream. The position is familiar, and the interest of Stevens's poem is that he is not so much affirming it as suggesting the movement of the mind that accompanies its consideration. He is especially conscious of the extraordinary effort required to even imagine, to find language for, the plain sense of things and hold the language there for the briefest moment: worth trying, he seems to say, but impossible, this attempt to behold "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." (179-80)

Kermode's citation of "The Snow Man" in discussing the paradox of the imagination and metaphor presented by "The Plain Sense of Things" is not accidental. But Stevens's position has shifted in the later poem, which, as Kermode describes, acknowledges the

"impossible" nature of Stevens's attempted project. In "The Snow Man," Stevens emphasized what must be done in order to strip the language and one's perceptions of metaphor; in "The Plain Sense of Things," this project has failed.

The bare winter landscape of "The Snow Man" reflects an ideal state of mind for Stevens—a state of mind without thought or contemplation or dwelling on the self, only a detached beholding and comprehension of the scene. The landscape in "The Plain Sense of Things," conversely, is cluttered with symbols that resonate within the persona of the speaker. The decayed house is a metaphor for Stevens's poetic project, a "great structure" of confident ambition when he began publishing in the 1920s, now a "minor house" whose ruins stand only as a testament to the failure of the aesthetic. Stevens directly acknowledges this failure in the last two lines of the third stanza: "A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition/ In a repetitiousness of men and flies." The image of the flies reinforces the images of decay presented in the dilapidated greenhouse and listing chimney; that the flies are paired with "men" and "repetitiousness" links them together with death and the meaningless buzzing produced by all three.

But just as "The Snow Man" takes a turn after its second stanza, so does "The Plain Sense of Things" shift after its third. The fourth stanza begins with "yet," alerting the reader to the upcoming change. Yet, the last two stanzas say, the poetic project may not have failed entirely or permanently. The "end of the imagination" which so depressed the speaker in the beginning of the poem "had/ Itself to be imagined." The death of a metaphor is impossible to express without employing metaphor, and therefore the metaphorical and imaginative mode of discourse cannot have died. The imagination is "required," even if the only thing being imagined is a metaphor for a great failure.

While this failure seems to be the message at the root of the poem, Stevens buries his meaning under layers of ambiguity. One of the more interesting features of this poem is Stevens's use of double meanings, almost puns, to create ambiguity. As Eleanor Cook notes in her essay "Riddles, Charms and Fictions in Wallace Stevens," Stevens's "play with paradoxes of outside and inside . . . suggests that there are multiple ways to think of a player and a game, or of a reader and a text" (163). Though Cook does not discuss "The Snow Man" in her essay, wordplay and ambiguity are actively employed in this poem. One instance of wordplay occurs in the second stanza, when the speaker admits "It is difficult even to choose the adjective/ For this blank cold." The description of cold as "blank" echoes back to "The Snow Man" and the "nothing" of its winter landscape. But in this poem Stevens also uses "blank" to mean "incomplete" or "unfilled." By choosing the adjective "blank" to describe the cold, Stevens's speaker has in a way avoided the difficult task of choosing an adjective at all.

Likewise, Stevens's use of the word "leaves" seems to be another double meaning or pun. In "The Snow Man," Stevens abstracts the particular winter scene in the first half of the poem to "a few leaves" in the second half. "The Plain Sense of Things" begins by stating that it takes place "after the leaves have fallen." This serves two purposes. The first is a simple difference in scenes; where "The Snow Man" was a poem of stark winter in which the scene is still and crystalline, "The Plain Sense of Things" is a poem of the decaying autumn, which still contains life even as that life is corrupted by the passage of time. The pond is mud rather than ice, almost as if the pristine snow man had melted, and is populated with a "waste of lilies" and a rat. The second meaning of "leaves" is that of the leaves of a book, or in this case, poems. Since the poem is about the failure or

"fall" of an aesthetic project, one can see easily this failure reflected in the fall of the leaves, which leads to a "return/ To a plain sense of things." Leaves come up again in the penultimate stanza among the list of things which "had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge." The recurrence of leaves also reflects the overall theme of the poem. Just as the first half acknowledges the failure of the "fantastic effort" and the leaves fall to earth, so does the necessity of using the imagination in order to describe the failure of the imagination require that "leaves," or poems, also must be imagined.

Another ambiguity created in the poem is the transformation of the "sound" which dominated the second half of "The Snow Man" into "silence." The silence itself can be read a number of ways; given the context of the poem, we can read it as the silence of death and decay, or as the silence left behind when a speaker or poet has nothing left to say. But Stevens's enjambment and line breaks complicate the image; this is not merely silence, but "silence/ Of a sort." This qualification and the comparison to "silence of a rat come out to see" imply that the "silence" may not be silence at all, just as the "nothing" beheld by the snow man and taken into himself was not nothing. But again Stevens leaves the reader with ambiguity; he does not indicate what "sort" of silence has been created by the imagination as it imagines its own end. The ambiguity leads to the larger question of how the reader is meant to interpret the meaning of the poem as a whole.

The emphatic "must" that directed "The Snow Man" here gives way to ambiguity. Just as the puns and qualifications create uncertainties in interpreting the text, so does the imprecise expression of the poem's critical breakthrough. "Yet the absence of the imagination had/ Itself to be imagined" is the point at which the poem turns on itself, but the exact direction of its turning remains unclear. Are we meant to take this necessity for

imagination and metaphor as positive, as a creative act, even though it undercuts Stevens's tenet of "things as they are," as demonstrated in earlier poems like "The Snow Man"? Does the poem end in triumph or despair?

Bevis superficially dismisses "The Plain Sense of Things" as a poem "full of ennui and the blank cold of symbolist malaise" (28). His reading simplistically errs in the same way that Bloom's reading of "The Snow Man" does: neither critic takes fully into account the division of the poems into halves. Where the snow man loses sight of the specifics of his surroundings and becomes a dehumanized "nothing" in the second half of that poem, the "sadness without cause" in the first half of the later poem drops away in the second half and is replaced by the symbols of continuing—though misdirected—life.

Whiting reads "The Plain Sense of Things" as "the elimination of all fictions . . . and the human projections that reflect our image." The "imagination imagining its own absence" is "a kind of creative anticreativity" (168). Whiting here acknowledges the paradox of the imaginative power, but does not venture a theory as to how we are meant to interpret it. Bloom ties "The Plain Sense of Things" back to his notion of reduction or the First Idea with which he explicated "The Snow Man." Bloom claims that Stevens "omits . . . a reimagining" in "The Plain Sense of Things" because "for Stevens in his early seventies, to live with the First Idea alone was no longer wholly dehumanizing" is it was in the earlier poem (309). Like Whiting, Bloom declines to give a positive or negative reading of the message of "The Plain Sense of Things," linking it (and "The Snow Man") instead to Emerson's "transparent eyeball," which is beyond such judgments (308). And perhaps we are not meant to pass a human judgment on the spotless idea. Like the "silence/ Of a sort," the "inevitable knowledge" is not given a

positive or negative gloss, but hangs "without reflections" at the end of the poem, required but not welcomed.

In his recent essay "A New Kind of Meditation: Wallace Stevens' 'The Plain Sense of Things,'" David Humphries provides an interesting explication of the poem. Humphries rejects Bevis's reading outright, claiming that "his reading of Stevens assumes the existence of a kind of meditative language that denies the metaphoric quality of all language," and instead sides with Frank Kermode's emphasis on the metaphorical nature of language and the paradox that Stevens often encounters in his attempts to escape from metaphor. Humphries takes Kermode's interpretation a step further, citing the works of philosophers Cyril Edwin Mitchinson Joad and Henri-Louis Bergson and the physicist Alfred North Whitehead, each of whose works Stevens refers to in various letters and essays. Humphries claims that Stevens took from these studies an understanding of scientific principles of motion and applied this understanding to language, which "embodies motion in words and thus challenges us to use our imaginations to complete the perceptions of our intellects and see the motion that is beneath the surface of ourselves and our worlds" (30). This argument has some merit, particularly when applied to "The Plain Sense of Things," with its apparently motionless pond scene, beneath the surface of which all the activity of life continues. However, Humphries errs in assuming that for Stevens motion is inherently positive. Ranier Maria Rilke's panther had shown years earlier the restlessness and terrible futility of motion without direction or purpose. The quickening of life is not always a blessing, and Humphries's assumption that Stevens perceived it as such is not only facile, but ignores the work of Rilke, Coleridge and others who took the opposite stance. Another problem

with this science and philosophy-based reading is that, in looking primarily to Stevens's letters and essays for source material, it divorces "The Plain Sense of Things" from the body of Stevens's poetry. Few poets have investigated the same problems and themes continually throughout their careers as Stevens did; to remove one poem from that context is to pluck a single thread of thought from its tapestry. Humphries also seems to think that Stevens was becoming somewhat soft-hearted in his old age, using poems such as "The Plain Sense of Things" to help readers "recognize the world around us and the way this world reflects our thoughts as part of the vital experience of our lives" (34). This humanist sensitivity is no doubt true to a certain extent, but Stevens never lost sight of the problems and paradoxes of language, poetry and the imagination that had concerned and consumed him throughout his career. "The Plain Sense of Things," like "The Snow Man" and myriad poems in between, continues the exploration of that paradox above all else.

B. J. Leggett writes in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* that "The Plain Sense of Things" in its statement of the imaginative paradox "says outright" what "The Snow Man" implies by "reasserting what it relinquishes" (192). This idea is correct at its heart, but the later poem complicates the ideals of its predecessor through its ambiguity and acknowledgement of the failure of the poetic ideal. "The Snow Man" urges that perception unify itself with reality while shedding the human emotions and associations that obscure true meaning. The snow man is a paradox; he cannot be a beholder of the scene and be "nothing," as the speaker says he must; he must use imagination—a human quality—in order to align himself with "nothing." In "The Plain Sense of Things," written thirty years later, the speaker acknowledges the impossibility of that paradox; and

although he first seems dejected by the realization, he finds hope in that imagining the absence of the imagination is itself a necessary creative activity. The reimagining serves as a kind of reaffirmation of the poetic project, not only accepting but also requiring the "inevitable knowledge" of imagination. In this sense the poem is not an acknowledgement of failure, as the first half would suggest, but an affirmation of a different possibility for success. Only the approach was wrong—the paradox cannot be avoided, nor should it be. It should be openly acknowledged and explored in all of its potential for revelation of meaning. Humphries was right in his reading of "The Plain Sense of Things" as a breakthrough poem, but the change came not through philosophy or perpetual motion, but through an honest acknowledgement and acceptance of the paradoxical problem of poetry.

Stevens's comments in "On Poetic Truth" offer a different, less harsh poetic statement than we see in "The Snow Man." The austere, emotionless vision of the snow man has matured and evolved into a more human mission statement:

> The poet sees with a poignancy and penetration that is altogether unique. What matters is that the poet must be true to his art and not "true to life," whether his art is simple or complex, violent or subdued. Emotion is thought to lie at the center of aesthetic experience. That, however, is not how the matter appears to me. If I am right, the essence of art is insight of a special kind into reality. But such insight is bound to be accompanied by remarkable emotions. A poem would be nothing without some meaning. The truth is that meaning is an awareness and a communication. (*OP* 237-38)

Stevens is still more interested in reality and truth than in emotion, but he now recognizes that some emotional association is unavoidable if the poem is to resonate with its author and readers. The poetic "mind of winter," without metaphors or emotions, has failed, but, Stevens admits, the paradox of using metaphor and emotion to uncover reality must, in the end, be part of the poet artist's project.

Wallace Stevens's career ends, then, not on a note of failure and futility but on affirmation of the possibilities of the poetic project. The imagery of death and decay is likely less related to the "failure" of his early project, and more closely linked to Stevens's knowledge of his own age—in 1954 he was seventy-five—and his awareness that he would not live long enough to revise completely his aesthetic to fit this new understanding. In the end the snow man has melted away, only to reform itself in the muddy, reflectionless pond from which springs a deeper, more mature understanding of the relationship of imagination to perception and the creative act.

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