Endless Summer:
Wallace Stevens, Big Sur, and a Poetry of Ideas
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For Andy
Acknowledgements

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All songs are sad songs, borne as they are on the insubstantial substance of our fleeting breath.

– Dave Hickey¹

Contents

I  Catch a Wave.................................................................................................................. 6

II  Oh! Blessed Rage for Order.......................................................................................... 8

III  Big Sur.................................................................................................................................. 18

IV  Crescent in the Sea, Maelstrom in the Sky...................................................................... 23

V  Not Quite the Fluid Thing.................................................................................................. 31

VI  The Green Bird Has Flown................................................................................................ 37

VII  A World of Words to the End of It.................................................................................. 43

VIII  Personae of Summer........................................................................................................ 54

IX  Eccentric Propositions of Fate.......................................................................................... 59

X  Farewell to an Idea.............................................................................................................. 77

XI  And He’s Sitting On Top of the World............................................................................. 78

Works Cited............................................................................................................................. 81

Works Consulted....................................................................................................................... 83
I

Catch a Wave

Let me tell you about a reverie I’ve been having: Wallace Stevens on a surfboard. He’s the only one out today, cruising the swell south of Santa Cruz, at Pleasure Point. It’s late in the afternoon, the mid-summer sky is grey and windy, and the waves break unevenly over rocks. Stevens paddles past the break and straddles his board, bobbing in wait for the precise moment. At last he chooses his wave, and catches it with a terrific lunge. Stevens surfs the wave, at once traversing the curling break and allowing it to ferry him to shore. It’s a perfect ride.

He paddles out again, and I notice this time how his dark wetsuit makes sleek his tremendous frame, which his brown wool surety-bond suit never especially flattered. A seal swimming nearby is no more natural in the waves than Stevens, and actually, the animal and poet share some resemblance: thick-skinned, sad-eyed, and pert-nosed; neither one is graceful on land, but in the surf, they are magnificent. Look: Stevens is reveling in the sport that so singularly joins him to it, bonds the surfer to the tide, marries the push-pull of a person’s desire with that desire made object in the sea. I see him there, at Pleasure Point: fully made, fully found.

Stevens never did discover the peculiar happiness that riding a wave confers. But it seems to me that his lyrics explore, especially in the later years, the phenomenalist possibilities that surfing reminds me of: a departure from temporal advance, an omniscient fusion with the present, and the refuge from desire these
circumstances engender. “Time is a horse that runs in the heart,” wrote Stevens, and it is no accident that he locates time in the organ of love. For Stevens, temporality and desire are two sides of a Janus-head, whose endless frustrations he attempts to escape through the space of the lyric. And in that space, he reaches for something called meaning, a description that might fill reality to its brim.

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One February afternoon, during the harshest winter of New England’s past century, I sat in my Middletown kitchen, typing a close reading of Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West.” Outside, snow silently engulfed my neighbor’s minivan. She’d had to park on the street, because her garage had been split open under the weight of a monster drift. Not driving was just the first in a chain of paralyses tipped off by the snow: no walking, no class, virtually no society outside the house.

In a way, this disengagement from my surroundings was good training for my scholarly engagement with Stevens’ world of imagination. With snowy critical distance, I could write at length on Stevens’ aesthetic of abstraction. I could pluck a tidy thesis from his cerebral field of meditations. But then, such a detached approach to Stevens’ poetry felt wrong. Why? Well, first, because Stevens’ resistance to scholarly paraphrasing is infamous. Attempts to summarize his poems are vain. Line-by-line dissections of his work, in order to prove a particular idea you think it builds towards, crumble through your fingers. Stevens frustrates these methodical approaches from the core of his poetry; even his syntax, as you will see, rarely accords to common grammar, and often defies logical pursuit. So I will tell you now that I do not plan to make grand, conclusive remarks about his work. I do not even plan to use his poems to serve a unified argument. Rather, my readings will be
something more like meditations, or explorations of the flurry of ideas contained in every line, often diverging into discussions of other writers and ideas that I associate.

And also, there is another aspect to my approach, which dawned on me during the storm. “The poem should be part of one’s sense of life,” Stevens wrote in *Adagia*; why shouldn’t the opposite also be true? Stevens’ detractors have panned his work as cold, limited in heart, irrevocably detached from reality. Superficially, perhaps this is true. But for me, as I leaned over “The Idea of Order at Key West,” I could not shake the feeling that there was life stirring beneath the icy surface of his poems, some warm-blooded creature in the depths of a placid lake. I wanted to consider that warmth with precision, but not with sterility; with thoughtfulness, but without sacrificing its vitality, its magic. So the approach I decided to take was one where I allowed my surroundings to breath life into my interpretation of Stevens, and vice versa.

So let me begin with the reading I tackled that snowy day. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the speaker considers a woman striding along a Floridian shore, singing over the bellow of the ocean. Stevens imagines (for even real places referenced in his poetry become fantastic ones) the landscape thus:

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,

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3 CPP, 905.
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone.  

The speaker says: if the sea and sky resonated alone, without the woman’s transcendent cry, this dream-beach would be richly sensual yet. The sounds and colors of the season would crash and churn without cease: an endless summer, but not the kind with surfers in it. For without the presence of consciousness, without the singer, the season would be “dark,” “heaving,” “repeated.” In spite of its sensory plenitude, the world would be a kind of abyss – not unlike the silent, white storm that surrounded me as I wrote. Outside, the snow had barricaded my door. Deserted streets and sidewalks rose as the sky fell in endless chunks. The winter was an hourglass: the same stuff top to bottom, infinitely reversible.

This white world was closer to another well-known Stevens poem, “The Snow Man”:

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

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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.\(^5\)

Traditionally, “The Snow Man” is read as a meditation on a crystallized union between reality and perceiver, in which both parts lose their individual somethingness as they melt into a single snowy nothingness. George Lensing writes:

…one might protest, “nothing” as no-thing suggests absence from, rather than unity with, the object. Yet nothingness-as-something remains the only way the poet can accurately codify the pure and undistorted state of being: a condition of reality utterly independent of a perceiver who, by his very action, distorts the object in the act of beholding. If the falsifying eye is removed and the perceiver set aside, reality is then a something per se, though a nothing to any looker-on.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Ibid, 8.

So, when any falsifying perceiver is taken out of the equation and replaced by a passive “mind of snow,” the “nothing that is not there” becomes the “nothing that is.” Distorted reality is purified, made substantial.

Lensing’s is an excellent interpretation and is the one most often assigned to the poem. But as my house sunk deeper in the white wash of the storm, as I thought through “The Idea of Order at Key West” and “The Snow Man” side by side, a more unusual reading of the latter poem seemed better. Helen Vendler suggests that, rather than a statement on the distorting act of perception alone, “The Snow Man” is a poem about longing for warmth, and about the distortion that this longing creates.7

Although winter is accompanied by its own lovely local objects – “the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with glitter / Of the January sun” – the speaker can’t see them as they are. No, he is too plagued by remembrances of more substantive spring and summertime flowerings – the some-things he prefers to the “nothings” of winter. Winter is a landscape of relativity: its “leaves” are “few”; the “place” is “bare.” The speaker can’t help but compare, and this persistent comparison distorts and makes miserable his “beholding” of the winter scene.

How can one overcome this mindset, the speaker asks obliquely? How can one “not…think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind”? Vendler notes that the first line of the poem is actually the conclusion to these questions8: “One must have a mind of winter,” and “have been cold a long time.” In other words, a person must


8 Ibid, 141.
have been snowed-in so long that she loses memory of summer. But the speaker is not quite there yet. Vendler writes:

   Like the deciduous trees, the speaker is denuded: he is “nothing himself.”

   He cannot affirm the beauty of the evergreen somethings before him; he can only try to banish his nostalgia for warmth and spring, seeing “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”… It will be some time, even after practicing the austerity of seeing nothing that is not there, before he can call what is there “something” rather than “nothing.”

   For the mind that places value on warmth and vibrant blooming (the “somethings” to which Vendler refers), the abundance of snow in winter is an abundance of nothingness. A land full of snow is in fact empty. In turn, the listener is empty, too; he is “nothing himself” while beholding the “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” In this way, winter for Stevens is a season of complete transitivity between subject and surroundings: Land = emptiness = beholder. But an accord that pairs a “snow man” with a “bare place” yields “nothing,” not to mention “misery.” This union does not generate anything more than the sum of its parts – which is zero.

   Summer is also a season of perfect subject/world accord, but in a mode exactly opposite to winter. For Stevens, summer is an equivalence of plenitude rather than emptiness; this is what we learn from “The Idea of Order at Key West.” A few pages ago, I had been saying that the fantastic summer-world in that poem would have been sensual, rich, and full by itself, without the presence of the strolling singer. “But it was more than that,” the poem continues:

   Ibid, 140.
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.  

These verses describe Stevens’ summertime union of world and subject: both substantive “somethings” on their own terms, yet perfectly whole when brought together. We know that the world alone, though perhaps “meaningless,” is sensually rich. And we know the singer possesses an utmost creativity; through her song, she is active “artificer” of her world – which is still a rich, “deep” world on its own terms. The singer is not forcefully “order[ing] the words of the sea,” but singing of them, as

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10 CPP, 106.
she at once strides along the existing sea and gives “self” to it. This simultaneous making and finding is what makes summer union so perfect for Stevens. As Stevens would later write in “Credences of Summer,” this union is “Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.”

Why does Stevens value this accord over that of “The Snow Man”? Because rather than nothingness, the fully made, fully found equivalence of summer yields something greater than its parts: “more than even her voice,” more than “the dark voice of the sea.” The union of singer and world produces meaning. By singing the song of her surroundings, the singer renders the sky “acute,” intelligible. She “measures…the hour” and isolates it as a distinct span of time, placing a limit on the “plunging” infinity of a vacant shoreline (or snow-buried block, if she’d been in Middletown). By making time finite, by punctuating the shore’s “meaningless” roar, her voice gives new meaning to the sea itself: “And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song.” The world has selfhood to begin with, but it merges with the singer’s upon her singing, and becomes knowable, meaningful.

The fruit of the singer’s union with the world is what Stevens seeks through poetry, which is his way of meeting and interacting with reality, of struggling to give it shape, definition, meaning. At the same time, however, he has doubts about language’s ability to do these things. In this poem, Stevens longs for a more organic voice like the singer’s, a “cry” rather than conventional words. The final verse of

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11 Ibid, 325.
“Key West” highlights the search for meaning through language and the frustrations that accompany it:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.12

Before human language, the oceans spoke. Before the conventions of language cemented our impressions of the world, the “demarcations” of words were “ghostlier,” not so finite. “Sounds” were “keener,” more acute. In that the limits of language dull his perceptive and communicative powers, Stevens despairs of these conventions; but in that words are all he has to approach meaning, he reveres them. It is with these mixed passions that he writes, “Oh! Blessed rage for order” – a line that conveys an astonishing range of feeling.

This ambivalence is also found in the later poem “Description Without Place”:

“It is a world of words to the end of it.”13 In that line, as throughout “The Idea of Order at Key West,” Stevens aligns language and endings, words and the limits of temporality. He does so with simultaneous misery and reverence, for, as with language, his poetic relationship to temporality is, to understate, complicated. As he grew older and closer to his last word, Stevens would begin to use the lyric to as a space for suspending imagined moments, as a means of resisting time’s real,

12 Ibid, 106.
13 Ibid, 301.
unrelenting advance. Summertime, in all its made and revealed significance, was the ideal moment for this lyrical temporal arrest.
Not long after that snow-swept afternoon in the kitchen, I got the email. Oh, warmest welcome! The archives internship at Big Sur’s Henry Miller Library was mine. I could spend my summer in an enclave of redwoods, books, and artists, if I wished. Did I ever. Keely, the Library’s head archivist, wrote that I’d sleep in a tent, produce my archives project on a sunny deck, and fend off wildlife while cooking in an outdoor kitchen. The idea of moving freely in the outdoors – let alone in Big Sur – thrilled me.

The seasons turned over, and I arrived at the Library in the middle of June. The Library itself (which was not at all a library, but a non-profit bookstore and an archive of considerable extent) was a one-story, one-room wooden house about the size of a spacious garage, with a wrap-around deck punctured here and there with persimmon trees. In front of the deck were a laboriously maintained patch of grass and a twenty-by-fifteen plywood stage, graced regularly by a range of musicians and artists. Redwoods lived around the circumference of the grounds, and behind the library was a gully outrageously green with clover.

I spent my mornings behind the desk in the shop, and my afternoons working on the archives database outside, moving across the little tables on the deck in pursuit of waning sunlight. Some bushes and a shed were the boundary between the main building and the small tent village in which I slept, along with my fellow intern Steven. There were two full-time managers (Mike lived in a van, Keely in a trailer), a
library director named Magnus, and Theo, a Norwegian Forest cat. Not thirty feet across the highway was the Pacific Ocean, collared by a chain of cliffs.

More than 130 million years ago, when the earth resembled a distant cousin of its present self, a slab of ocean floor moved northeast beneath the Pacific. Along its tectonic path, this ancient plate (dubbed “Farallon” by geologists) received all sorts of deformations and deposits, including a bulging chain of rock plunked somewhere on its face.

When Farallon butted against the west coast of North America, the low density of the continental plate caused Farallon to subduct, meaning that it melted away beneath the continent – all but that stringy bulge of ocean rock. Too much of a protuberance to neatly slip and vanish under North America, the bulge was shaved off by the edge of what is today called California. The central West Coast now had a massive, unkempt mustache of rock. The continental and oceanic plates continued to grind, shoving crustal rocks from all latitudes into this chaotic accretionary wedge. With considerable faulting and folding over tens of millions of years, that mess of boulders became the Santa Lucia range of California’s central coast. These are the mountains that define Big Sur, which is so often celebrated for its astonishing collision with the Pacific.

When you sit down at Nepenthe, a restaurant that offers a supreme vista of southern Big Sur, your focus centers out. Before you is a chain of massive ridges, colored blue and lightening further on, carpeted with redwoods and wildflowers. You

are on top of one of these cliffs, but you can’t see the end of them. And then, you’re also watching the sea, but from a lifted vantage normally unique to air travel. Waves move southeast in rows, like text across an infinite scroll. Have you ever tried to read the sea? You wish you could. You wish you could grasp this staggering hugeness.

Looking down, you’re somehow comforted that your pocketbook still sits in your lap, that your shoes are still laced to your feet. Looking out, you’re a mite on a piano key. You are moved; the music requires that you be moved.

If you’re familiar with Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime, you’re looking at it. In 1759, Burke wrote:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it.¹⁵

When I took my parents to Nepenthe, my mother barely spoke. I asked her why, and she said, “This landscape empties me.” Or rather, it filled her, to the point of pushing out words: a perfect Burkean specimen. And while I doubt she would use the word “horror” to describe her reaction to the Big Sur coastline, I believe what Burke is getting at – in eighteenth-century language – is the frustration that accompanies an object’s escape of the viewer. Big Sur cannot be grasped. My little eyes and mind

cannot fix its vastness. No person can read the sea, or hold the mountains in her gaze. These objects are in themselves too vast to fully comprehend, and they are also constantly changing under the unstoppable forces of gravity, geology, and above all, time. Maybe that’s where the horror lies in Burke’s contemplation of the sublime: the unrelenting beat of time, the march to death.

Going out on a delicate limb, this could be why so many writers have flocked to Big Sur: to face mortality embodied in coastline, and to engage and combat that astonishing presence in their work. Robinson Jeffers, resident Big Sur poet of the early twentieth century, wrote:

Though one at the end of

the age and far off from this place

Should meet my presence in a poem,

The ghost would not care but be here, long sunset shadow in

the seams of the granite, and forgotten

The flesh, a spirit for the stone.16

Jeffers is imagining living on at once in the space of a poem and in Big Sur. These lines pivot on the word “here”: Jeffers defines it as “the seams of the granite,” but the word’s presence on the page doubles its impact. “Here” is the stone and the poem, whether or not the ghost of Jeffers “cares.” Jeffers finds shelter from the anxiety of mortality first by fixing the unfixable Big Sur landscape inside these lines, and then

by proclaiming a spiritual afterlife to take place therein. Out of language, that most vaporous material, he constructs a space where time is replaced by immortality.
IV

Crescent in the Sea, Maelstrom in the Sky

Jeffers was not the first to conceive of the lyric as an extra-temporal refuge. Emily Dickinson’s work departs resolutely from temporal order, referring to another invisible order that is invoked as immortality. In her classic study of the relationship of Dickinson’s poems to temporality, *Lyric Time*, Sharon Cameron organizes Dickinson’s work into two groups: poems in which time is brought to a halt and poems whose subject is time’s halting. Of the former group, Cameron writes:

The poems… represent interpretive difficulties as their words come unhinged from all context; and this phenomenon is perfectly consistent with the speakers’ desire to shelter themselves from the anxieties of temporal sequence. As much at loose ends as Beckett’s Unnamable, they seem to imagine a bitter equation between coherence and completion, completion and an analogic association with death. They will not make sense, will not totalize themselves, for to make sense is to do so in the clutches of temporal finitude.

Conventional wisdom says: time and language are arrows pointing forward. All lives truck towards death; all sentences towards meaning. Yet Dickinson’s temporally static poems manifest a consistent anxiety towards these linearities. She chafes at the

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conventions of narrative, in which stories always move to resolution. Indeed, Dickinson seeks to dethrone narrative as a reader’s reigning source of meaning.

A snippet of narrative theory might help here. Cameron usefully cites a comment by Walter Benjamin on the relationship between a storyteller’s power and his knowledge of a character’s death. Benjamin writes, “Death is the sanction of everything that the story can tell… it is natural history to which [the teller’s] stories refer.”19 Another way of putting it is, the ending is the sanction of everything that the story can tell. It makes prior incident significant. Accordingly, Peter Brooks dubs plot an “intentional structure,”20 forward-moving and oriented towards the goal of meaning. You could say that the reading of plot is an expression of the desire to reach a meaningful ending.

That ending, meanwhile, informs the way the story is told. Brooks writes, “The realization of the desire for the end encounters the limits of the narrative; that is, the fact that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins. The telling is always in terms of the impending end.”21 In other words, the ending, or the death of incident, infuses plot with intentionality. Every sentence alerts the reader that the story is traveling somewhere definitive. As Cameron puts it, a novel is a complete story of a character that comes in touch with his end, or who perceives a stopping point to experience that implies a closure analogous to death. Cameron even suggests

19 Ibid, 69.
21 Ibid, 52.
that we read narratives, in part, as concerned researchers preparing for our own
death.\textsuperscript{22}

Here’s the problem: life is not narrative. We cannot derive from real lives that
satisfyingly complete knowledge we derive from fictional ones. Dickinson despairs of
the possibility of complete stories, of stories whose conclusions are known, of
complete knowledge. Her lyrics insist that coherence be made of isolated moments
because we have no direct experience of an alternative.\textsuperscript{23} Meaning does not reside in
narrative causality, but in the articulation of an isolated moment, in consciousness out
of context. It is the speaker’s words that matter, not her past or future. This is why the
configuration presented in a lyric is usually a static one; not because nothing happens
in it, but rather because what does happen is arrested, framed, and taken out of the
flux of history.\textsuperscript{24} The search for meaning is futile, Dickinson despairs. But in
glorifying the eternal now, her lyrics make triumph of such misery.

For example, in “Behind Me – Dips Eternity,” the lyric speaker describes a
configuration in which time is evaporated. Meaning cannot be ordered or asserted in
such a world – nor can it, really, in the poem:

\begin{quote}
Behind Me – dips Eternity – \\
Before me – Immortality – \\
Myself – the Term between – \\
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray, \\
Dissolving into Dawn away,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Cameron, \textit{Lyric Time}, 69. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 71. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 70-71.
Before the West begins –

‘Tis Kingdoms – afterward – they say –
In perfect – pauseless Monarchy –
Whose Prince – is Son of None –
Himself – His Dateless Dynasty –
Himself – Himself diversify –
In Duplicate divine –

‘Tis Miracle before Me – then –
‘Tis Miracle behind – between –
A Crescent in the Sea –
With Midnight to the North of Her –
And Midnight to the South of Her –
And Maelstrom – in the Sky –

The speaker is this “Maelstrom – in the Sky,” pushing apart the poles of “Eternity” and “Immortality,” inhabiting a space beyond the limits of time. But these poles are not sturdy. What is “Eternity” without an impermanent point of reference? How can we know “Immortality” without mortality? Out of context, the two poles resemble one another so closely that other apparent contrasts become indistinguishable:

“Death” suggests “Dawn,” the echoes of “Miracle” parallel the echoes of “Midnight.” The world is a skipping record; words become sounds, and meaning is lost in endless

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repetition (not unlike “The Snow Man”). Free of beginning and end (“Dateless”), unbroken by event (“pauseless”), yet insistently not the “Kingdom” of heaven, the reader is at a loss for any context in which to situate the speaker. She can only ask: what is this world Dickinson describes? What is the speaker? “Her” existence remains indeterminate, confused; but this is all intended. For Dickinson, to make sense is to do so under the authority of temporal finitude—and this is what she seeks to avoid.

But what if there were a moment in which time stood still? In other words, what if Dickinson zoomed in on that indeterminate “Maelstrom in the Sky”? The second group of poems – those that take time’s suspension as their subject – perform that very action. For Dickinson, the suspension of time entails either a union between the subject and the world, or the unconsciousness of any alternative to such a union’s absence. For if temporality is pared to a single moment, the awareness of subjectivity evaporates:

There is a Zone whose even Years
No solstice interrupts –
Whose sun constructs perpetual Noon
Whose perfect Seasons wait –

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August cease

Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 73.

Ibid, 139.
And Consciousness – is Noon.\textsuperscript{28}

Summer is the season of ripe possibility, of the potential for omniscient union with the world. In the perfect bliss of time’s suspension, summer lasts forever, and so does the clear, panoramic vantage of the noontime sun. The poem pivots, however, on the word “cease,” which implies a passage of time that the poem had previously denied. How could August cease in this “Zone” of perpetual summer? Perhaps these last lines suggest a ceasing of any consciousness of time’s passage or of linguistic conventions naming the months. When rightly ignorant of temporality and language, subjectivity melds with the sun’s “construction”: “Consciousness – is Noon.” That seems to fit.

But what seems to fit is not what Dickinson is trying to achieve. “There is a Zone” – like virtually all of Dickinson’s work, and Stevens’, for that matter – is meant to be slippery, and to defy the extraction of a coherent meaning. The poem exists in order to resist the limits of time, in order to explore distinct moments detached from a mono-directional lifespan, outside the conventional producers of meaning of which Dickinson despairs, such as conventional grammar, such as death. And “There is a Zone” exists to explore that very resistance, the work that the poem itself is doing. The lyric poem is that moment where time can be suspended. The “Zone” is the lyric itself:

If a poem denies the centrality of beginnings and ends, if it fails to concern itself with the accumulated sequence of a history, it must push its way into the dimensions of the moment, pry apart its walls and reveal the discovered space there to be as complex as the long corridors of historical

\textsuperscript{28} Dickinson, \textit{Poems}, 1056.
or narrative time. For the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story. 29

If “Behind Me – Dips Eternity” pries apart the walls of a moment and puts into poetry the obscure situation of its speaker, “There is a Zone” takes a step back and describes that act of poesis, in which time is halted and the authority of sequence simply does not figure in the world. If “Behind Me – Dips Eternity” takes as its subject the place of a seascape (albeit obliquely), “There is a Zone” takes as its subject description without place.

Which is, as it happens, the title of a poem by Stevens. I like to think Stevens tips his hat to Dickinson in “Description Without Place”:

It was a queen that made it seem
By the illustrious nothing of her name.

Her green mind made the world around her green.
The queen is an example… This green queen

In the seeming of the summer of her sun
By her own seeming made the summer change.

In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
And seems to be on the saying of her name.

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29 Cameron, Lyric Time, 204.
Her time becomes again, as it became,
The crown and week-day coronal of her fame.30

The ironic line “The illustrious nothing of her name” makes me think of Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”31 – a poem that bitterly ironizes her legacy as “poetess” in virgin white, shut in and floating about her spinster’s home. In fact, for Stevens, Dickinson’s “green mind” is a verdant, potent imagination, a force so radical that it transforms the world and its temporal structures. It “made the world around her green,” and “In the seeming of the summer of her sun/ By her own seeming made the summer change.” And the ability to imagine such possibilities, that power of “seeming,” has accorded Dickinson a kind of immortality: in the expectant space of the lyric (“the golden vacancy”) in which she radically reconceives temporality (“Her time”), Dickinson lives on: “she came, and comes, / And seems to be.” She is Stevens’ “queen”: his masterful, sorrowful predecessor in taking the lyric as subject and in imagining summer as the particular season in which it is possible to suspend time, unite subject and object, and glorify an eternal now.

30 CPP, 296-7.
31 Dickinson, Poems, 288.
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Not Quite the Fluid Thing

To restate: Dickinson and Stevens use poetry to examine the work performed by poetry. In this crucial tendency, and in its source – a profound despair of temporal and linguistic limits – they are kindred poets. Yet so often is Stevens pegged – and understandably – as a rococo aesthete, an essentially gaudy poet, the opposite of Dickinson. I believe Stevens is under-read outside of academia for these reasons, and because his oft-fanciful idiom of the imagination can be enormously challenging. Here’s what I mean:

Unsnack your snood, madonna, for the stars
Are shining on all brows of Neversink.32

The first line of “Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain” contains two made-up words and one I’d never before heard, except as the name of a computer game. A new reader might be disoriented, and maybe even a little suspicious. Why the dandified lexis?

What is Stevens up to?

Turns out, “snood” is “a fillet, band, or ribbon, for confining the hair; latterly, in Scotland (and the north of England), the distinctive hair-band worn by young unmarried women.”33 This virgin’s accessory hints at the funny, faux etymology of “madanna”: an amalgam of “madame” and “madonna.” “Unsnack,” however, is pure

32 CPP, 305.

Stevens: playful, sonic, and totally enmeshed in the fantastic world of the poem. That last part, that “mundo of imagination,” as Albert Gelpi calls it, is what often makes Stevens so difficult. How does a reader penetrate, let alone navigate, a word-scape constructed at such a remove from reality?

“The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully,” Stevens writes in *Adagia*, and his poems do defy the reader’s dissection – almost. Until you read, and reread. Eventually, you see that Stevens uses certain terms repeatedly across his work, and you acquire a certain fluency in this “mundo.” You begin to see past its surface metonymy, and what emerges is life, and sadness: the Dickinsonian despair of time, endings, meaning. “Late Hymn from the Myrrh Mountain” continues:

Already the green bird of summer has flown
Away. The night-flies acknowledge these planets,

Predestined to this night, this noise and the place
Of summer. Tomorrow will look like today,

Will appear like it. But it will be an appearance,
A shape left behind, with like wings spreading out,

Brightly empowered with like colors, swarmingly,
But not quite molten, not quite the fluid thing,

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35 CPP, 910.
A little changed by tips of artifice, changed
By the glints of sound from the grass. These are not

The early constellations, from which came the first
Illustrious intimations – uncertain love,

The knowledge of being, sense without sense of time.
Take the diamonds from your hair and lay them down.

The deer-grass is thin. The timothy is brown.
The shadow of an external world comes near.36

This poem is not a “There is a Zone”-type moment of high summer union. Rather, it is the “Late Hymn” of a night at summer’s tail. The season’s verdant peak is past: “Green” turns to “brown”; the “deer-grass is thin.” In earlier months, the stars “intimated” the desired effects of fluid subject/world union: “The knowledge of being, sense without sense of time.” Now, summer is nearing its transition.

“Tomorrow will look like today,” but it will be “a little changed”; it will not be “quite the fluid thing.”

Yet this is still a moment of summer. It is night, but the mountain is illuminated: “the stars/Are shining on all brows.” Decay approaches, but the speaker beseeches his “madanna” to undress. “Unsnack your snood,” he says, “Take the

36 Ibid, 305.
diamonds from your hair and lay them down.” This is his last chance for easy summer love, for the plentiful, meaningful marriage that high summer yielded. But this is a star-crossed love, doomed by time, or impending change. Soon it will be fall, and the fullness of the world will trickle away.

We get a glimpse of Stevens’ attitude towards autumn in the reproachful “The Motive for Metaphor”:

You like it under the trees in autumn
Because everything is half-dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon –

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound –
Steel against intimation – the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal dominant X.\(^{37}\)

The “You” who “likes it under the trees in autumn” shies from the heavy plenitude of summer, from the perfect, meaningful consciousness/world union that takes place under the high sun. You, coward, “shrinking from the weight of primary noon,” are “never quite yourself / And did not want nor have to be.” You hide from summer’s true “being,” from its fullness and meaning, and instead seek “metaphor” in a world of “half colors,” “quarter things,” and “words without meaning.” The phrase “exhilarations of changes” is ironic, for the thrill of seasonal transitions is trifling compared to the immersive totality of summer. To prefer the halfway seasons of autumn and spring is to prefer a life of hollow sedation; it is to know summer and the possibility of meaning, but not to embrace it. For Stevens, that’s as shameful as it gets.

It is no wonder that time is an onslaught for Stevens. Summer is the one moment in the year in which he can conceive of finding joy and meaning in life. Meanwhile, other seasons represent decay and the depletion of possible truth. It is no wonder that Stevens, like Dickinson, would want to arrest time’s advance and

\(^{37}\) Ibid, 257.
transformations, to remain forever in the “noise and the place / Of summer.” It is the noise and place of a meaningful world.
All summer long, I tinkered on the deck, sold books by Henry Miller, and guarded the shop during concerts. I emailed archivists, researched Miller, and built web pages. I arranged chairs and tables, tied Boland knots, catered private events. I drank wine, looked into the stars, and went surfing once or twice. And every single day, I thought about Stevens. All summer long, I read his poetry and his biographies, scholars’ criticism and theory. On days off, I even attempted to write this thesis – a challenge, to say the least. Mostly, I just felt anxious about what few pages I was producing.

It took me some time to realize I was developing a strange, Stevens-tinted lens through which to view Big Sur, a “mundo”-inflected view of my surroundings far more valuable than anything I could have written. Yes: the poems were working themselves into my experiences. The more I read, thought, and fretted, the more Stevens’ ideas ingrained themselves into my daily acts of perception. And the more I looked around in Big Sur, the closer I felt to my poet.

Although it seems you must be veering on the limit of the Santa Lucias when you drive up Highway One, there are in fact lots of accessible sub-shoulders quietly hanging below the road. To me, these spots rivaled the sublimity of Nepenthe or any far-flung hiking destination, and there was one in particular practically in spitting distance of the Library. So, every few evenings in July, Steven and I walked a ways down Highway One to this vista that overlooked the Packard (of Hewlett-Packard)
family ranch, which was a couple hundred acres of mostly razed cattle land bordering the Pacific. The spot itself was about fifty feet of dirt path flanked with sage, fennel, monkey-flower, a few cypresses, and one magnificent oak. We figured that somebody maintained the place because of the four well-stocked bird feeders dangling here and there, and since the trail was always clean. But we had never seen anybody else there, and so spent many evenings there with journals, beer, the sea and the stars.

Except one Monday night, just before sunset, we happened upon a slight, older man watering a lilac bush. Steven immediately understood that this was the spot's caretaker, and made thrilled introductions. The man’s name was Shanti, and yes, he was the person who came quite voluntarily every Monday to fill the feeders and prune the bushes. But much more than that, he came for the birds, or really, his Bird – a particular scrub jay he had been visiting at this spot for more than ten years. He described their first meeting: he'd held up a chunk of bread (which, he said, you really shouldn't do since bread is nutrition-less) and Bird had zoomed to grab it. The next time he came, Bird had shot out of a bush and flapped his wings in Shanti's face: a sure sign of recognition, said Shanti, though not necessarily affection.

Nevertheless, Shanti was impressed by the intelligence and memory of his flighted acquaintance. Week after week, he returned to offer Bird snacks (peanuts, after he learned the truth about bread), and to ensure that Bird and his growing family enjoyed a clean and well-stocked habitat. Bird was his friend, he said, although the feeling was not requited for a long time. Years passed before Bird apparently looked at Shanti in a way that seemed to say, as Shanti said, "Hmm, maybe you aren't as
stupid as the rest." Since then, Bird had welcomed him with a peck on the chest every Monday.

Shanti was soft-spoken and kept adjusting the brim of his bucket hat as he told this story and ones of other birds. Many times in the night he was unsure of his pronunciation. It seemed it had been a while since he'd had human company at this spot (or elsewhere), but his love of birds couldn't have been purely social, since his ornithological knowledge was expert. He answered all of our questions about aviary Big Sur in his own birdlike way, with swooping arms and sound effects. He wore a t-shirt from the Ventana Ornithologist's Society, and though he said he'd "crammed hard," it wasn't clear if he studied birds professionally or just there, on that little shoulder-to-the-shoulder roadside spot. Either way, he told us it was Bird that had inspired him to learn the ways of the winged world.

Steven, Shanti, and I talked until it was dark and too cold for Shanti to keep on in his shorts and t-shirt. Steven was leaving Big Sur soon, but Shanti told me that if I returned another Monday, he'd introduce me to Bird, and show me to do the peanut thing. As Steven and I walked him to his van, I promised I’d be back.

We did not know whether Shanti was a scientist or a homeless person. We did not know why he was at his happiest with feathered creatures. We did not know how often he interacted with humans. But none of that seemed to matter. On that little roadside vista, among the most stunning on the Big Sur coast, Shanti had found a world for himself and the birds. And in coming weekly to carefully hang birdseed cones and water young trees, in coming just to be there, he had also built that world.
Shanti made every Monday a poem, and for me, the beauty of that fact transcended questions of his real world circumstances.

I returned two Monday mornings later, just before work at the Library began. As I walked off the highway and up to the spot, Shanti was unpacking his van, extracting his necessary objects for the day: a folding chair, tripod, two water jugs, and a huge sack of peanuts. He seemed happy to see me, but remarked on how early I was. I had work, I said, and could only stay for a few minutes, but I could help him set up his things, and then maybe feed Bird a peanut? Sure, sure, and we carried his things to a good spot in the middle of the trail. Shanti tore open the bag of peanuts and crushed a few on the ground. A flock of tiny grey birds poured out of the oak tree and pecked up the scatterings. Bird wasn’t among them, but Shanti wasn’t concerned; he’d spotted Bird on a telephone pole towering nearby. Shanti explained that Bird had seen me, a stranger, and this made him shy. I had to declare my friendliness. Shanti handed me a peanut in its shell and instructed me to hold it up in the air. Before I could say “Like this?” Bird swooped in to snatch the nut out of my fingers, his wiry feet grazing my hand as he flew. What a thrill! I’d never been in such close contact with a wild animal.

After a few more whizzing peanuts, I asked Shanti where he’d driven from that morning. He told me he lived deep in Carmel Valley, about 90 minutes north of Big Sur. He was a caretaker there, too, he said, and got to live for free in the home of some man he’d known a long time, though who was not exactly a friend. The man was indulgent of his teenage soon, Shanti said, and the son was cruel. In fact, the boy had taken his BB gun into the backyard and shot dead a nest of eagles Shanti had
been monitoring. Why? Out of spite, as far as Shanti could tell. He didn’t know how much longer he could take that. He wished he could live at the Spot, he wished he could live in Big Sur, close to his family of birds, but it wasn’t possible. There wasn’t much room in the world for a Bird Man, and not much time, either. I thought of “The Idea of Order at Key West” – there never was a world for him, except the one he made.

The last time I went to the spot was at the end of my time in Big Sur. There were no more Mondays left. I brought my companion, Andy, to meet the Bird Man. “Paul,” he said to Andy, shaking hands.

“Is that your real name?” I asked, a little startled.


“Shanti,” I said. I felt embarrassed. He laughed. “Shanti. That’s a good one.” He lit a cigarette. “I’ve had a lot of names.”

How could he have been anyone but the Bird Man? Disconcerted, I asked if we could feed Bird some peanuts, and Paul made a sarcastic joke about opening a roadside attraction, feed-the-birds, come one, come all. He let us do it, but with a sort of irony attached that hadn’t been there before. Later, when I told him I was leaving soon, he fell silent. Had he really liked me that much? I reassured him that I’d return to Big Sur soon, and he brightened. He was an old man, he said, and he was looking for someone to take care of the spot on the other days of the week, and eventually on Mondays, too, when he became unable to make the weekly drive. “An heir,” he said, “Is what I think they call it.”
I wanted to tell him I’d be back for good, that one day I’d take care of Bird and his clan, that I wanted to preserve his spot for avian generations to come. But I was leaving in three days, and there was nothing to do but disappoint him. The Bird Man shrugged. “That’s how humans are,” he said, waving his calloused hand through the air. “Flighty creatures, every one.”

So Shanti became Paul. The Bird Man became a real person, with a common name and bad habits, anxieties and disappointments. Well, you say, of course he was real. But hear me out: I had been so moved by his self-invention, his singular happiness at the spot, and his total understanding of the birds, that the obvious fact of his normal-personhood stuck me in the heart. He needed his world, and his world needed him. The highway was just on the other side – his spot could suffer terrible damage without him watching over it. Why shouldn’t he be able to keep it and his birds from harm? Why couldn’t the Bird Man live forever? It didn’t seem fair to me. Immortality suited him better.

That night, Andy and I left the spot with a sack of peanuts, having agreed to feed to Bird for the few days we remained. We returned to the spot the following morning and offered the food the way the Bird Man had showed us. But not a single creature flocked, not even Bird. After all, his truest friend was absent. We left some peanuts crumbled on the dirt, and as we returned to the library to pack our things, I thought about the loyalty that bonded Bird and the Bird Man and the contentment they offered one another in what little time they had. Maybe you could say they lived in that hymn of late summer. Their world was still lovely, still full, but its shadows were lengthening.
To change gears: In my discussion of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” I noted Stevens’ ambivalence towards language in the stanza that begins “Oh! Blessed rage for order.” Overall, however, that poem is marked by Stevens’ confidence that meaning can be reached through language, especially given Stevens’ conception of the “singer” as poetic artificer of the world: “And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker.” There is direct correspondence between the singer and world: what she makes, is. In such a straightforward relationship, meaning is forged: “It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at her vanishing.”

But whereas the muse in “Key West” is an agent of “making,” the “green queen” of “Description Without Place” (which was written eleven years later, eight years before Stevens’ death) is an agent of “seeming”: “It was a queen that made it seem / By the illustrious nothing of her name.” With such an oblique connection to the world, is meaning still the product of a poet’s union with her surroundings? How can we have a plentiful union or complete knowledge when even queens only make things “seem”?

Stevens has no resolute response to these questions, and nor do I. All I can say is that in “Description Without Place,” Stevens’ attitude towards the production of

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38 Ibid, 106.
39 Ibid, 106.
meaning differs from that in “Key West.” In the later poem, meaning is no longer the product of a poet’s union with the world. Meaning is almost totally extra-linguistic, something beyond the terrestrial. Poetry can share in/extend itself to this transcendental kind of meaning, but it cannot exactly create it. Although, perhaps poetry can reveal it – as always, Stevens is slippery. Either way, these uncertainties seem to suggest and reinforce the idea that, in some hidden space beyond a poet’s metaphor, meaning lives: “a knowledge incognito,” “A palm that rises up beyond the sea.”

And again, if anything reaches out to this ineffable palm, poetry might. That’s why it must be important. This is where Stevens ultimately arrives in “Description Without Place.” The poem begins, however, with a timid supposition:

It is possible that to seem – it is to be,

As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems

It is and in such seeming all things are.

The lines are classic late Stevens: tentative, theoretical, as if positing a new philosophy before a cabinet of scholars. He offers the sun as an “example” (you can almost hear him crunching the slide projector to a start) of a “seeming” that is the same as “being.” On a summer’s day, the sun seems yellow, round, hot. We don’t need to think long and hard about what the sun is; its seeming is independent of our intellect. This is true of all objects: “the actual seemings that we see, / Hear, feel and

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40 Ibid, 300.
41 Ibid, 296.
know. We feel and know them so.” No intellectual leap is necessary to understand a chair or a tomato. The simple, sensory information these objects provide comprises our knowledge of the physical world. And we accept this knowledge as a kind of straightforward meaning, or truth.

The faculty concurs. But this is just step one of his argument. The poem continues:

There are potential seemings, arrogant
To be, as on the youngest poet’s page,

Or in the dark musician, listening
To hear more brightly the contriving chords.

There are potential seemings turbulent
In the death of a soldier, like the utmost will,

The more than human commonplace of blood,
The breath that gushes upward and is gone,

And another breath emerging out of death,
That speaks for him such seemings as death gives.42

In addition to “actual seemings,” there are “potential seemings,” which have to do with acts of artistic creation. A poet strives to set knowledge – perhaps the simple

42 Ibid, 298.
knowledge of objects, but more likely some grander knowledge, ultimate truth – on her “page,” just as a musician struggles to hear “brightly the contriving chords”: both vain endeavors. These artists create “seemings” out of their own self-conscious fancies that cannot truly “be,” for these artists are “young,” “dark,” “arrogant” – not yet enlightened that truth must be more than a “contrivance.” Their work neither yields nor reaches meaning.

The same can be said of death. At first, Stevens’ comparison of the “death of a soldier” with a musician’s “contriving chords” seems off, but less so if we look back to the idea of death retroactively giving shape to life, or the end investing what came before it with significance. I think this is what is implied in “Another breath emerging out of death, / That speaks for him such seemings as death gives.” If we think of death as the period in the long sentence of life, every previous clause is made sensible when we arrive at the final dot. This kind of death adjective-izes a person’s life; it makes it seem a certain way. But as we saw in Dickinson, reality doesn’t work like this. For Dickinson, meaning does not reside in this sort of narrative causality, but rather outside temporality, outside the sphere of sentences. Meaning is greater than grammar, Stevens wants to say.

He continues:

There might be, too, a change immenser than

A poet’s metaphors in which being would

Come true, a point in the fire of music where

Dazzle yields to clarity and we observe,
And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole,

That we do not need to understand, complete
Without secret arrangements of it in the mind.\textsuperscript{43}

Something “immenser” than death, “immenser” than “metaphor”? Stevens is talking about complete, true knowledge of the world, the kind that exists outside of time and language. This is “being” without any kind of “actual” or “potential” seeming preceding it. This is the whole truth, and nothing stands before or after it; it is whole, simply by our perception of it. In a flash of revelation, “we observe, / And observing is completing and we are content.” There is no reflection, no “secret arrangement” necessary to comprehend the “world that shrinks to an immediate whole.” You are holding a eucalyptus pod, admiring its prismatic shape and nutty scent, and suddenly: poof! You behold infinity in this one little seed. All that is, is right before you: pure being, pure truth. Again, this is not the kind of meaning that we got out of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” where meaning is something made and found; this is a grand truth that seems to exist outside of terrestrial reaches, and one that poetry can at best share in or refer to, obliquely.

But we can’t forget the conjectural, conditional phrasing that surrounds this idea. Terms like “Come true” and the subjunctive tense (“might be,” “would be”) characterize this perfect truth as something the poet deeply desires, but understands as

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 298.
essentially indeterminate, and indeterminable. It is something to believe in, something “immenser” than Stevens himself could manufacture out of seemings, actual or potential. This meaning exists outside of the world. Still, even with this understanding, Stevens reaches for truth through approximation. He reaches, through the seeming that is poetry. And the process of poetry, as Beverly Maeder writes, is a revelation in itself:

The contingency of the life of the senses does not prevent the poet from savoring the approximations he unfurls. Rather, seeming and simile allow him to revel in the very process of approaching possible revelation through language, despite the transitoriness any revelation implies.44

The name Stevens gives to this revelatory process is “description,” and it is on this word that the poem turns:

Description is revelation. It is not

The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,

In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,

Intenser than any actual life could be.45

The OED defines “description” as “The action of describing; the result or product of this action.” This definition’s emphasis on the word as a human process is useful, because for Stevens, description is something man-made – it is an “artificial” collection of words that reference the world. At the same time, description is not “The thing described, nor false facsimile.” This is an anti-Platonic moment, in which Stevens wants to be clear that description is not a mimetic reproduction of reality, or a hazy sign pointing to something better. Rather, description “exists / In its own seeming,” and while it is “plainly visibly” and represents “our lives,” it is itself somehow truer, better, “Intenser than any actual life could be.” And it is not the simple seeming of quotidian objects; nor is it the overly contrived seeming of lesser art. Description is a seeming that partakes in reality, but also departs from it in a way that these other seemings do not.

The notion of description as simultaneously sharing in and departing from reality is borrowed from Coleridge’s theory of symbol. For Coleridge, a symbol partakes of the reality it represents. A symbol is “consubstantial” with the world; it links its particular representation with all of reality. How so? In The Statesman’s Manual, Coleridge defines the imagination, that faculty which alone can make and understand symbol, as:

…that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to

a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors.47

But it is not only the products of human imagination (in this passage, Coleridge is referring to the Scriptures) that the imagination can read as symbolic. The same is true of “another book, likewise a revelation of God – the great book of his servant nature… [For we may look upon the world] as the poetry of all human nature, [and] read it likewise in a figurative sense, and… find therein correspondencies [sic] and symbols of the spiritual world.”48 This symbolic perception of reality is unlimited in scope, and leaps fluidly between particular and universal, idea and image, new and old, subjective and objective. The imagination also unifies these apparent opposites.

And when we add to this definition of the imagination (humanity’s symbol-making, perceiving, and unifying faculty) Coleridge’s description of the symbol – “a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal”49 – we can see how for Coleridge the symbol potentially encompasses the depth of humanity and the height and breadth of all the world, in and out of time. Symbolic knowledge reaches out to all that man can know.50

As with symbol, Stevens’ description extends itself to everything that can be known. The “seeming” of a particular “description” shares in the “being” of

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48 Ibid, 70.
49 Ibid, 30.
everything, like the infinity of the eucalyptus pod, or the wintry oneness of the “juniper shagged with ice.” These things “are,” just as everything living “is.”

And what about that striking line, “Description is revelation”? “Poetry and apotheosis are one,” Stevens writes in “A Pastoral Nun”; this is no different than “Description is revelation,” for all that concerns “description” ultimately concerns poetry. Description, then, ascends to the level of gods; it shares in the transcendent.

And also, the word “revelation” is a craftily multivalent choice: it is both the action of revealing and the product; something performed and something that exists.

“Description” is also something performed and made. What it performs, and what it makes, is a connection to the revelatory.

The poem continues:

Thus the theory of description matters most.

It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world,

The buzzing world and lisping firmament.

It is a world of words to the end of it,

In which nothing solid is its solid self.

Here is the line “It is a world of words to the end of it” in context, reminding us of Stevens’ frustration with the limits of language. The question, now, is this: if the “word is the making of the world,” how could it be that “Description is revelation”?

51 CPP, 327.
52 Ibid, 301.
How can a collection of words, however thoughtfully organized, reach out to truth?
Or to anything but its own boundaries? These are central conflicts with which Stevens
endlessly struggles, questions to which he never arrives at a satisfactory answer. Only
this is clear: over and over again, he compels himself to believe that there is
something to approach, amorphous and diverse and inscrutable as it may be. He
compels himself to believe that poetry can encounter truth grander than grammar. “It
is possible, possible, possible,” Stevens writes in “Notes Towards a Supreme
Fiction.” “It must be possible.” 53 If it were not possible, all would be nothing; we
would be snowmen and the world would be blank.

Stevens cannot accept the notion that life might be fundamentally empty. This
is why poetry “matters most”; it expresses the belief in the possibility of true
seeming, of meaning, of plenitude. However, Stevens’ need to state – defend, even –
the value of his poetry demonstrates how profoundly uncertain he is that there is truth
outside of language. This is also where Stevens differs crucially from Coleridge. The
earlier poet had a deep and abiding faith in language as an accurate account of
experience. Stevens, on the other hand, cannot put one word on the page without
questioning the phenomenological implications of the act. The possibility of
meaninglessness presses closely upon him, and the bleak reality of “The Snow Man”
is forever on his mind. He writes as much to contest that version of reality as to
propose others, such as the lush world of summer.

If seeming is description without place,
The spirit’s universe, then a summer’s day,

53 Ibid, 349.
Even the seeming of a summer’s day,

Is description without place.\textsuperscript{54}

For Stevens, a “summer’s day” is the confirmation of a meaningful world. A summer’s day represents the knowledge of being, sense without sense of time. And if a summer’s day is “description without place,” a summer’s day is poetry itself: the suspension of time, the encounter of purest truth.

But it could never be just that, for Stevens’ poetry is a differentiated planet: the heaviest elements sink to the core. And even on the hard rock of summer, there is profound uncertainty in its depths. Description is revelation, and poetry is apotheosis, but where does that leave us in real life? I think of the Bird Man at the most beautiful spot in Big Sur, hanging cones of seed, crushing peanuts. He wonders: when I am gone, who will care for this world? His Mondays are perfect and fleeting, like pheasants disappearing in the brush.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 300.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 911.
Most nights at the Library, Steven and I would cook dinner in the outdoor kitchen and call it in relatively early. But on the Fourth, Steven and I left work early and headed up Highway One to what Mike had called the event of the summer: a pool party blowout on a mountaintop citrus orchard. In Steven's Subaru, we made a slow ascent up three wily miles of dirt road as narrow and edge-sunken as a bowling lane, squeezing past partygoers trekking up the hill on foot.

At last, the road delivered us to Apple Pie Ranch, or at least, a wooden sign nailed to a pine told us so. Following the example of others parked nearby, we crammed the car between a yellow RV and a Lexus. An arrow painted the colors of America directed us down a gravel path cut through the pines. Shortly, these trees turned to citrus, with branches heavy with fat oranges and lemons slightly green. There were other fruit trees, too, and under a persimmon was a wooden table piled with golf-ball sized plums and bottles of wine. Steven and I each took a cup, and continued down the trail.

We arrived at the unreal made true: a rolling, grassy field dotted with more fruit trees and garden patches, overlooking the Santa Lucias – not the jagged coastal range, but the softer, greener undulations to the east. On a shady slope, people sat on blankets eating picnic food, while some lovely girls played volleyball in bikinis. Most young women, actually, seemed to be wearing bikinis, and older ones wore sleeveless tops and elegant long skirts. Men wore shorts, and many were shirtless. No one wore
shoes. As Steven went off to find the picnic spread, I surveyed my own outfit: black jeans, tall boots, and a fancy camera over my shoulder. I was clearly an outsider, and I felt self-conscious. Best to keep moving.

Mike’s band was setting up on a little stage covered in paper lanterns. I waved to my coworker as I walked past, sipping my wine. It was six o’clock, but the sun was still high. Now I saw that the Apple Pie Ranch comprised of several graying wooden houses: the homes of a half-dozen old Big Sur families who, as I later learned, ran the ranch (where, somewhere, there were also horses) as a cooperative. I wandered down a sloping garden path. Off to one side was a gazebo, where a cluster of men stood over a wafting, smoky grill. At the bottom of the path was a brick-lined pool, built right up on the edge of the property, for prime ravishment by the mountains’ green splendor. From here, actually, I could see the sea, or really, the tiniest scratch of summer haze dangling over it. I took some photos as little kids ran around and swam naked, as did some adults.

A guitar jangled, and I knew Mike’s band was about to be on. I made my way back to the stage as the band struck up their first song: the Tennessee Wig-Walk. Old and young washed up to the grassy floor, took hands, and danced. I bobbed a little, but mostly watched the scene. One of the couples especially fascinated me: a golden-skinned girl in a white dress and cowboy boots with a wide-eyed old man with a Mohawk. Later that night, I would meet both of these people, and learn that the woman was from Florida and living on a trust-fund, and that the man was a veteran, homeless for decades, who currently lived in a tent in the hills above the Bird Man’s
spot. But for now, I danced a little with Magnus’s wife, Mary Lu, and wondered about these lovely revelers.

The music ended, and I set out again wandering the property. The sun was finally setting. Beyond the pool was the true ranch of the ranch: an orchard of citrus trees cut into the hillside in tiered terraces. Inconceivably, a handful of pickup trucks were parked between the trees, and there were also a number of pitched tents. “Nice camping spot, eh?” someone said. I turned. It was Benjamin, who had volunteered at the Blonde Redhead concert at the Library the previous night. Between transforming the Library into a concert venue and guarding the backstage area (really the back deck, delineated with a piece of fabric) I hadn’t been able to chat much with Benjamin, but now I could. Originally from Mississippi, Benjamin lived up in Pacific Grove, where he owned a little house near the golf course. He was an atmospheric scientist, and studied cloud patterns and their correlation to the tides. I thought this sounded like an incredibly cool job, and I told him so. Benjamin just shrugged and said he preferred moonlighting at rock shows at the Henry Miller Library. Then he stooped down and began to press the soil, testing its softness. What was he doing? Well, he’d heard the Apple Pie people would eventually barricade the road, in order to prevent drunk driving. So he’d figured he’d spend the night in his car, or possibly curled up in the dirt under an orange tree.

This Apple Pie Neverland couldn’t have been real, right? Surely this story comes from the realm of dreams. But no, there it was, happiest folk-land, at the limit of North America. It was as if everyone had collectively agreed to freeze time in some ridiculous 1960s free-love escapade. But actually, what was happening was
this: in Big Sur, and at this party, people built themselves, from the volleyball babes to the Mohawked veteran, the naked swimmers to Benjamin the volunteer. Every person I spoke to had their “real world” story, and every one of them improved on it by being there.

I don’t mean to say that Big Sur is a place for reinvention, where people shed past lives and start afresh, the way people think of Hollywood. But I mean that it is a land that reckons with your idea of self, and insists on your creative self-betterment. Maybe this has to do with Big Sur’s astonishing natural landscape, how you look out at the rocks and sea, at the sublime, at the march of time, at all that is vastly older and greater than you. If you live in Big Sur, at the end of the continent, mortality hits you “between the eyes,”56 as Henry Miller wrote. You must consider how you use your time. And so once you get past the stymied speechlessness my mother felt at Nepenthe, you can’t really be neutral about life. You must live zealously, better-than-ever, larger-than-life – like the Apple Pie partygoers. And if you can’t, then you probably don’t belong.

Which is kind of how I felt at the party, wandering awkwardly with my clunky camera and covered skin. As I photographed and chatted with these happy folks, I saw the wondrous possibility by which they defined their lives. I saw that they had built themselves a paradise, and lived in it. But I didn’t. I mean, I was the intern to this whole experience, the temp, a passer-by. I observed and I learned, but I did not do as the full-timers did. How strange, and a little sad, to be a note-taker in paradise. I thought of Stevens’ summer dream-poems, of the singer at Key West, of “sense

without sense of time,” of a complete and meaningful world. He has so much to say about these possibilities and desires, yet he says them with such uncertainty, and at so far a remove from reality. I’ll just say now that this is never truer than in “Credences of Summer,” one of Stevens’ most beautiful poems, and ultimately one of his most bitter. But, as I stepped shyly around Apple Pie Ranch, I wondered if Stevens felt something the way I did then, like an informed observer of perfect contentment, but not a participant in it.

Who knows? All I can say is this: for me, Stevens and Big Sur had a lot in common, with their beautiful, hard surface features and the poignancy at their molten cores. They both reached to the sublime and, it might be said, landed in the ridiculous, at least part of the time. Stevens and the Sur were always in dialogue, sharing their poetry through the medium of my imagination, expanding and informing my fascination with each.
IX

Eccentric Propositions of Fate

So let me talk about “Credences of Summer,” a poem that seems to pull together the many strings of thought I have hitherto unspooled. I think it’s useful to begin by looking back at my discussion of Dickinson, and repeat the idea that Stevens’ fixation on the eternal now spills from the same source as Dickinson’s: despair of temporal and narrative finitude. “The months have ends – the Years – a knot / No power can untie/ To stretch a little further / A skein of misery – “57

Yet Stevens’ response to this despair is distinct from Dickinson’s. When Stevens confronts temporality, he does so not by expelling it from the world in totum, as Dickinson does, but rather by imagining a particular point in time and suspending experience there. Situating the two poets in Big Sur, if Dickinson speaks from a shifting, churning maelstrom lifted from ocean into sky, beyond any reliable context, then Stevens speaks from atop a rocky precipice, at the edge of a continent. He takes the end of time and makes it not the end, still within time but without the anxiety of its advance. He turns incompleteness into totality, threat into answer. Unlike Dickinson, he is not so concerned with immortality, per se – but with imagining what the apex of life might look like. Like the Fourth of July partiers, Stevens responds to his mortality by scaling it and singing it up top.

This scaling of mountains is what’s happening in “Credences of Summer.” If the poem from Myrrh Mountain was a “Late Hymn” marked by certain change,

57 Dickinson, Poems, 423.
“Credences of Summer” is the hymn of full, perfect summer, or the fantasy of that perfect summer. I think it’s important to note that whereas “The Idea of Order at Key West” is situated in a place with some connection to reality (I say this because of the title), “Credences” takes place in a dream-like theatre. The poem is the staging of the perfect summer, a beautiful charade in which all Steven’s greatest wishes come true.

So let’s begin with Canto I:

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
And spring’s infuriations over and a long way
To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
The fidgets of remembrance come to this.
This is the last day of a certain year
Beyond which there is nothing left of time.

It comes to this and the imagination’s life. 58

The time is “now,” and Stevens invites the reader to “come” into his present-tense world of true summer. This summer is a space of plenitude, saturated with sensory features: the “weight of fragrance” makes even the roses “heavy.” This space is a refuge for the “mind” weary of troubles – here it may simply “consider” a world perfect in itself. But this is not heaven or the afterlife. The speaker stands at a

58 CPP, 322.
particular point in earthly, seasonal temporality; with “spring’s infuriations over and a long way to the first autumnal inhalations,” “This is the last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time.”

Is Stevens speaking from the brink of apocalypse? Is this the end of days? No. I think what Stevens is getting at is that time is suspended, and the speaker therefore anticipates nothing. He is not looking ahead or “beyond.” Death does not factor in the experience of this pause in time. Rather, the speaker possesses the “sense without sense of time” mentioned in “Late Hymn from Myrrh Mountain,” in which the 360-degree perspicacity of the “now” replaces the forward gaze of temporality. The speaker is, as Stevens writes later in the poem, at a “limit of reality,” but not at its closing. Summer is the end without the end, described in an apocalyptic tone without imminent apocalypse. And in this anti-ending, in this moment in which time is arrested, all that we expect from endings in narrative – the revelation of meaning, a sense of completeness – is at last discovered. It’s also interesting to note how in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” meaning was a function of “measuring” and limiting time, whereas in “Credences of Summer,” meaning is a function of the expansion of an arrested moment. There is no more making or doing, only finding. And what is found in this moment are the “credences of summer,” that that makes summer so heavy, final, true.

Stevens writes in Canto II:

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as

The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.

Let’s see the very thing and nothing else.
Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight.

Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
Look at it in its essential barrenness
And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
Fix it in an eternal foliage

And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
Of change still possible. Exile desire
For what is not. This is the barrenness
Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.59

Stevens chooses “pine” as the correlative to summer’s “anatomy,” since it refers to the evergreen, that tree of “eternal foliage,” but also to the verb “pine,” meaning “To yearn; to languish with desire, to hunger for something; to long eagerly.”60 Stevens asks us to “postpone” this pining, both “physical” and “metaphysical,” so that we may see the essential pine, “the very thing and nothing else.” We need not attempt “a

single metaphor” (here I think of “Description Without Place” – “a change immenser than / A poet’s metaphors”). In summer, we have “eternal foliage,” “joy of such permanence,” an unchanging “centre”: in other words, the truth, which is the object of Stevens’ poetic desire.

I’d like to look a little closer at the nature of this desire. Helen Vendler quotes Coleridge’s definition: “The still rising Desire still baffling the bitter Experience, the bitter Experience still following the gratified Desire.”

Desire is a cycle through longing and disappointment, never to be stopped so long as a person lives. But what if we suspended time, as in “Credences”? Then we would also “Exile desire for what is not” (in other words, banish the desire for what we don’t have).

But for Stevens, the stakes are even higher, because desire is also for him an act of creation. Here’s what Vendler herself has to say:

Anyone who singles out, by desire, some one man or woman as a singular valued object, creates by that act a fiction, an idealized image in which desire finds, or thinks to find, its satisfaction. Anyone who has ever believed in a cause or in a God creates in the same way an idealized image – the perfect state, the Messiah, Paradise – which is also one of those supreme fictions, a Platonic form. Desire always expends itself on imagining “the fulfillment of fulfillments, in opulent/Last terms” (Primitive, IV). But it is not only our sexual and religious desire that imagines the existence of an ideal object; it is also our intellectual desire, hungry for an ideal truth, that is, a complete and stable one… [Yet]

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Stevens shifts the locus of attention away from the transcendent to the actual, from the object of desire to desire inventing its object...\textsuperscript{62}

Religious, sexual, and intellectual desire: for Stevens, these are rivers that stem from one sea. A person who desires something intangible, something greater-than-herself, whether it be James Franco, Krishna, or Marxist theory, is a poet of an idea. That person is the artificer of an idealized object, an image of perfection, which she “pines” for and attempts to reach. Her desire looks relentlessly to the “opulent / Last term”; she moves straight toward her ultimate object with intense focus and direction.

Yet when, or if, that endpoint is reached, desire is still not satisfied. The imagined object is too idealized to hold up to any real-life encounter. Under the harsh light of reality, a person’s fictions wither. She is left in disillusionment and despair. And that is when she picks up and starts afresh. Instead of renouncing her illusory object, she remakes it. Vendler offers Penelope’s web as an image of human desire: woven afresh every day, unraveled again every evening. Each joy of possession is followed by the despair of disbelief, which is followed by the creation of a new and brighter idea.\textsuperscript{63} So while desire is a forward movement in that we constantly move ahead to our object, it is also a cycle of endless creation and de-creation. Like light, both particle and wave, desire is both advance and cycle. And it is elemental to our experience of the world, in that we all experience desire. Stevens writes in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

\begin{quote}
…the priest desires. The philosopher desires.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 29.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 30-1.
And not to have is the beginning of desire.
To have what is not is its ancient cycle.
It is desire at the end of winter, when

It observes the effortless weather turning blue
And sees the myosotis of its bush.
Being virile, it hears the calendar hymn.

It knows that what it has is what is not
And throws it away like a thing of another time,
As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.

So even “the poet” and “the philosopher” – the most intense ascetics – are caught in the turn of desire. And what is “the beginning of desire”? It is “not to have,” or to experience absence, a lack, to yearn for fullness in the face of nothingness. It is, as in “The Snow Man,” “to think / Of [the] misery in the sound of the wind.” Indeed, Stevens uses the turning seasons as a metaphor for desire: “To have what is not” is “desire at the end of winter.” Restless, “virile” desire “hears the calendar hymn,” and off it moves in search of another weather. “[Desire] knows that what it has is what is not”: its current possession is never what it seeks, and so desire “throws [winter] away like a thing of another time, / As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.” The old season is passé, undesirable, and so desire rolls past it, as morning casts off yesterday.

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64 CPP, 330.
It makes perfect sense that Stevens uses the calendar as a metaphor for desire, because for him, desire is homologous with time. Like desire, time moves in constant anticipation of a particular end. Time is also cyclical in terms of its revolution through the seasons, through creation and de-creation. So time, like desire, is a double movement. It is both cyclic and linear, as if a spiral on its side. Also, both time and desire construct ideas of truth that are, for Stevens, incomplete and illusory. Again, time is end-oriented, which is to say death-oriented, and it is death that gives retrospective meaning to life. As we’ve seen, “such seemings as death gives”\(^{65}\) are seemings that will never “be” or be satisfactory. Desire, too, imagines an ideal truth and moves toward it, only to disappoint. So, both time and desire are engines that elude full, complete truth.

So it is no wonder that Stevens aligns time and desire metaphorically, as in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and in “The Pure Good of Theory”: “Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse / Without a rider on a road at night.”\(^{66}\) Here, time is situated in the seat of desire. Indeed, across much of Stevens’ later work, it is as if time and desire run in parallel spirals, both cycling and advancing. And somewhere in the space between the two spirals lies the befuddling unhappiness of human experience.

But then, in “Credences of Summer,” Stevens imagines the possibility of these two spirals meeting. Instead of running in parallel, time and desire move diagonally toward each other. And in summer, in the imagined summer-scape of “Credences,” these two lines converge, at a point of total understanding, where a person’s

\(^{65}\) Ibid, 298.

\(^{66}\) Ibid, 289.
experience is the same as her desire and the same as all of time, it is and just is, and there is nothing else outside of it. It is complete meaning, at an end that is not the end. At this apex, a person can “Exile desire / For what is not,” because she is totally contented with “the fertile thing” that is her experience. There is no need to look forward or up or down or back; she simply looks around, as in Canto III:

It is the natural tower of all the world,

The point of survey, green’s green apogee,

But a tower more precious than the view beyond,

A point of survey squatting like a throne,

Axis of everything, green’s apogee

And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymn.

It is the mountain on which the tower stands,

It is the final mountain. Here the sun,

Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.

This is the refuge that the end creates.

It is the old man standing on the tower,

Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness

Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,

By an understanding that fulfills his age,

By a feeling capable of nothing more. ⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ Ibid, 323.
At the convergence of time and desire, we find “the natural tower of all the world.” This is the brightest apex of experience: “fertile,” “ruddy,” “green’s green apogee,” where nothing escapes our gaze (I think of that noon-time consciousness in Dickinson’s “There is a Zone”!). We behold “everything” in the flesh and all around us, without any future longing, without anxiety of death. We find the object of our desire without wanting any more. Lovers and parents are rightly united. This is the “happiest folk-land,” in which the hymn of “marriage” can be heard, rather than the “calendar hymn” of time. Even the sun “rests” from his elliptic. On this “final mountain,” desire and time bring one another to a stasis, and all that is felt is contentment.

And what about the “old man standing on the tower”? This man “reads no book” because he has no need for narrative, which we can think of as another spiral on its side. A book offers the cyclical motion of page turning and the tantalizing promise of a meaning-making ending. But this old man is beyond any desire for narrative, or the narrative that is desire. He is “appeased” by his total, timeless comprehension of summer. He knows “ruddy” summer, shares in it, and this “understanding… fulfils his age.” In the last of his days, though not yet having reached death, this man beholds the truth of summer, and is content. “This is the refuge that the end creates”: the true end, not as in death, but as in the end as a goal, as in what is desired, as in truth.

Thus says Canto VI:

The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth.

It rises from land and sea and covers them.
It is a mountain half way green and then,
The other immeasurable half, such rock
As placid air becomes. But it is not

A hermit’s truth nor symbol in hermitage.
It is the visible rock, the audible,
The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,
On this present ground, the vividest repose,
Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
A mountain luminous half-way in bloom
And then half way in the extremest light
Of sapphires flashing from the central sky
As if twelve princes sat before a king.\(^{68}\)

Here it is: the unbreakable “rock of summer.” This is the hard, singular truth that Stevens only ever dreamed of, that he has reached for over and over again, but has never grasped. This is that inconceivable “change immenser / Than a poet’s metaphors” from “Description Without Place.” Truth, or meaning, is Stevens’ most intense desire, his greatest artifice, an imagined, idealized thing. And here, in summer-world, this wish comes true, and his desire is satisfied and put to an end by this “fertile thing that can attain no more.”

\(^{68}\) Ibid, 324-5.
It’s also interesting to note how the “rock of summer” is not a religious truth rooted in the heavens. Rather, it “rises from” from earthly features (“land and sea”) and “covers” them. The truth is found in terrestrial objects, but is also larger than them. And “it cannot be broken”; though little things may fade, the truth is immutable, and immortal. How does Coleridge define the symbol again? Ah, yes: “a transluence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the transluence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal.”

Here, in summer, the “Individual” is the “mountain half way green,” and the “Special” is “the other immeasurable half.” The “Temporal” is “postponed,” and the “Eternal” stands before us. In “A mountain luminous half-way in bloom / And then half way in the extremest light,” we have the symbol made flesh, a dream come true.

I also cannot help but think of Big Sur, “the natural tower of all the world.”

Let’s look at Burke’s definition of the sublime once more:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it.

All motions are suspended, and the mind is filled to the brim with the something-ness of the object before it. That’s what happens in the first few cantos of “Credences of

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70 Burke, Of the Sublime and the Beautiful, 132.
Summer,” and it’s what happens to people at Nepenthe. Just another point of comparison I think is interesting.

Okay, but Stevens never made it to Big Sur, and it would be unlike him to leave out the uncertainties that his own reality casts on this tower of the world, this rock of summer. Where do real-world feelings figure in all this? Right here, in Canto VII:

Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs,
Secure. It was difficult to sing in the face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object. Deep in the woods
They sang of summer in the common fields.

They sang desiring an object that was near,
In face of which desire no longer moved,
Nor made of itself that which it could not find…
Three times the centred self takes hold, three times
The thrice centred self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
Once to make captive, once to subjugate
Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.\textsuperscript{71}

In reality, Stevens says, people “sing” of their ideal object, rather than face it and be contented by it, as does “the old man standing on the tower” who “Absorbs the ruddy summer.” Unlike him, these “singers” distance themselves from the “object.” “Far in the woods” and “in the common fields,” they sing “unreal songs… of summer,” rather than experience it. Why? Why is it “Secure” to desire “an object that was near”? Why is it “difficult to sing in face / Of the object”? I think Stevens is commenting on the strength of desire’s cycle. These singers imagine their “unreal” ideal object. Perhaps they know that to face the object would be to face disillusionment, which would necessitate its remaking, as the cycle of desire goes. So they must “avert themselves / Or else avert the object”; that is, look away, or change the object. They expect to be dissatisfied, so they turn their backs, “secure” in singing their “unreal” songs.

But then, we have a mysterious ellipses, and seven cryptic lines about the “thrice concentred self,” who has “possessed the object.” Where does this figure come from? Are we still in the realm of desire-driven reality? Yes, and no. It’s as if this figure breaks out from the pack of singers, dashes through the woods and across the fields, and at the edge of a continent, at the limit of reality, discovers the object of his desire. He “rips it in savage scrutiny,” having sung “unreal” songs about this object for so long. Is it the same as the song he sang? Is it the unreal made true? Yes: its “meaning” is just as total and perfect as he had hoped.

\textsuperscript{71} CPP, 325.
Yet his possession changes the object. Whereas the object of desire (summer) is simply there and understood by the old man on the tower, without any fidgets or alterations, this “concentred self” has already “sang of” his desired object. “Fully made, fully apparent, fully found”: there is an element of making in this “hard prize,” and this makes it different from the “rock of summer.” Perhaps for Stevens this prize is better than the rock, because it is something won, something earned. Its existence is found, but its truth is made. And this makes the hard prize somehow closer to reality than the immutable rock of summer. The rock of summer takes place in an utterly imagined space, a refuge at an end of time, impossible to actually reach for Stevens. It is possible, however, that the hard prize may be realized. For Stevens, it must be possible.

So what are we left in “Credences of Summer”? The poem imagines both time and desire brought to an “end” (as in a halting of temporal advance, and a happy arrival at the object of desire), the effortless, meaning-making union of old man and summer, and the complete plenitude of summer. We have the poet-figure of the “thrice-concentred self” who both makes and finds truth in summer. These are hopeful, beautiful imaginings of Stevens’ greatest desires. But the awareness that they are desires, that they are imaginings, is, as always, too pressing to ignore. The poem ends in Canto X:

The personae of summer play the characters

Of an inhuman author, who meditates

With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night.

He does not hear his characters talk. He sees
Them mottled, in the moodiest costumes,
Of blue and yellow, sky and sun, belted
And knotted, sashed and seamed, half pales of red,
Half pales of green, appropriate habit for
The huge decorum, the manner of the time,
Part of the mottled mood of summer’s whole,

In which the characters speak because they want
To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,
Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,
Completed in a completed scene, speaking
Their parts as in a youthful happiness.\footnote{Ibid, 326.}

It’s suddenly as if Stevens zooms out with his camera, revealing that the previous cantos in the poem have been but the “personae of summer” playing a charade. See, he says, all of this has taken place in the imagination of an “inhuman author.” In the real world, the “rock of summer” is not possible, time cannot be stopped and nor can desire – but isn’t it nice to imagine these “roseate characters, / Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry”? And with that, we are reminded of Stevens’ deep ambivalence towards meaning, and his despair of forward-moving cycles – time, narrative, and desire.
Yet somehow, still, we come away with a small and strange hopefulness. For if Stevens really felt there was no possibility of revelation, he would stop writing. And on the other side of the coin, if desire and time were not constant, his poems would not exist. If desire is coterminous with life, and all men are poets of an idea, than Stevens is more so than anyone. His poems are his ideal objects, made and destroyed, re-imagined and made again. Poesis, then, is also coterminous with life. In “Men Made Out of Words,” Stevens wonders:

What should we be without the sexual myth,

The human revery or poem of death?

Castratos of moon-mash – Life consists

Of propositions about life. The human

Revery is a solitude in which

We compose these propositions, torn by dreams,

By the terrible incantations of defeats

And by the fear that defeats and dreams are one.

The whole race is a poet that writes down

The eccentric propositions of its fate.73

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73 Ibid, 309-10.
Between “death,” “terrible incantations,” and “fear,” this poem is certainly
dark on its surface. So, humanity is “a poet that writes down / The eccentric
propositions of its fate.” Fueled by the anxiety of death, the need for sex, and the
“fear that defeats and dreams are one,” we never stop wanting or revising the objects
of our desire, our ideas for the future. This is sad, right? But then, doesn’t this make
every person a poet? Well, that’s kind of beautiful. And for Stevens, life is nothing
but these “eccentric” cycles. Poesis, the composition of propositions about life: this is
what makes the world turn. Without it, “What should we be”? Aimless, adrift, sinking
in the deep nothingness between time and desire, pulled under in their currents.
Poetry is the making of the truths we most long to discover. It is a board with which
to surf these tides, a means of stopping time, holding desire, meeting the wave.
You know, ironically, I wanted there to be a kind of narrative sustaining this thesis. I wanted to show an arc of disillusionment in Stevens’ work; that as a young poet, he believed in truth and meaning and their discovery, and became increasingly uncertain about these possibilities as he aged. But no, I have found that Stevens’ uncertainty is there all along, and so is his need to believe. Throughout his career, Stevens struggles with both feelings, and so there is no narrative, no: only moments, in which one side of his heart wins out over the other. Truly, he resists narrative on every level.

Instead, the story with Stevens is my story. It’s the story of my own *Transport to Summer* – which is, by the way, the title of the book from which most of the poems I’ve discussed come. It’s the story of my months in Big Sur and Stevens’ steady saturation of my thinking, and of how Big Sur brought to life a poetic realm critics have called a “queer ghost world.” And then, my story is not really a story at all, but a collection of moments, ideas, and associations. In this way, I hope I have been true to Stevens. Certainly, it has felt true to me.

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XI

And He’s Sitting on Top of the World

When my days wrapped up in Big Sur, I drove home to Los Angeles by way of the Canyon Club in Agoura Hills, where I met my parents to see Brian Wilson. I’d seen him before, but not since I had become quite so fanatical about the music of the Beach Boys, read all the biographies, and grown attached to Wilson as a sort of romantic figure. I was excited to see him, but felt some apprehension about how rigid he was reported to be on stage, how sort of vacant after his handful of breakdowns, even though he's been performing for a decade or so now (which he hasn't been since the mid-sixties, when the pressures of touring with the band became unbearable).

And rigid and vacant he did seem during the first set, singing only some of the songs (all Beach Boys hits, though he's released plenty of new material recently) and then usually with the aid of a teleprompter hooked up to his keyboard, which he never played. His band, The Wondermints, should not be called a band, but an orchestra. They were the tightest musicians I’d ever heard live, maybe because nobody's authorial ego was getting in the way of what they played, definitely because they were all utter pros and obviously venerated Wilson.

Which they should have. I mean, I did, and I do. But it was hard to watch Wilson, who is practically a mythological figure to me, inseparable from the rock that is for me his music, hunched on a stool behind the keyboard, his body partly hidden by the teleprompter and his voice often absent in the mix, supported in every way by
such vital and present musicians. I expected and remembered him to be this way, so I wasn't quite disillusioned, just kind of sad, like if you learned all about John Glenn and then met him, and it turned out he'd forgotten what it's like in space. So with Wilson, it was kind of like, oh, he is a tragic figure, and I'm sad but unruffled by that thought, because it's what the biographies say, and besides, it makes the music especially romantic.

But then, in the second set, I started thinking about how generous it was of Wilson to give audiences these appearances, since they are so visibly difficult for him to do. Then I realized that the performances might not be easy for him, but that he wouldn't be doing them if he didn't want to or enjoy it on some level. And then, like a pile of space rocks, it hit me: very likely, Wilson loves this. For decades, he accorded all his creative energy and support to the Beach Boys – mostly unaided, usually unappreciated, and often misunderstood. And it nearly destroyed him. So now, for him to be nearly seventy and onstage, backed by musicians who venerate him, in front of an audience that is simply grateful, having outlived his brothers, resisting mental illness, at the helm of his own orchestral sloop, that cannot be called anything but a success. Not a tragedy, no. And the music is still just as great, even now that in my mind Brian Wilson is the hero of a different drama, a comedy, in which he has the last laugh.

In other words: he’s still surfing. And in my dreams, so is Stevens: surfing time, surfing desire, and uncovering satisfaction, even happiness, in these rolling, turning tides.
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