

UNCALCULATED RISKS

*The poet striding among the cigar stores,
Ryan's luck, hatters, insurance and medicines.
Denies that abstraction is a vice except
To the fatuous.*



The Working Lives of Wallace Stevens

**Can anyone make a good living as a poet?
Insurance executive Wallace Stevens
never had to find out.**

The poet striding among the cigar stores,
Ryan's lunch, hatters, insurance and medicines,
Denies that abstraction is a vice except
To the fatuous.

—Wallace Stevens, “A Thought Revolved”

WALLACE STEVENS WAS MANY THINGS, but he was never an easy man to understand. The poems that earned him the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and two National Book Awards are famously complex and imaginative. The surety claims to which he devoted his career at Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. were equally intricate. Stevens' colleagues in the insurance business viewed his poetry writing as one of his many eccentricities, and most claimed not to understand a word of his verse. Even more perplexed, however, were the legion of writers and critics, from Stevens' time to the present, who failed to understand his continued devotion to what they viewed as a bleak and uninspiring profession.

“He signed his soul over to the Hartford,” writes Michael Schmidt in *Lives of the Poets*, describing Stevens' entry into the insurance business. The poet John Berryman was no more charitable in a sardonic poem, “So Long? Stevens,” published after Stevens' death:

He lifted up, among the actuaries,
A grandee crow. Ah ha & he crowed good.
That funny money-man.

Even a Stevens friend, the poet William Carlos Williams (himself a physician), once asked him, “Can you tell me why you work so hard to earn a living?” The consensus of the literary world seemed to be that Stevens enjoyed the wealth earned through his insurance career and was unwilling to turn his back on that comfortable life to immerse himself fully in poetry. He was often faulted for living a double life, rather than one focused on his writing. As with so much of Stevens' life, however, the

truth was considerably more complex.

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pa. in 1879. He attended Harvard College for three years, where he began writing poetry and journalism but didn't graduate. Stevens then moved to New York, where he earned a law degree from New York Law School in 1903 and was admitted to the bar in 1904. After failing to establish himself in legal practice, he took his first insurance job with the New York office of the American Bonding Co. in 1908.

Stevens remained at that firm until 1913, when he joined the Fidelity and Deposit Co., later called the New England Equitable Insurance Co. When that organization eliminated his position in 1916, Stevens relocated to Connecticut and joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co., where he stayed for the rest of his career.

Stevens' professional specialty was the field of surety bonds. Surety bonds are a form of financial guarantee, made by an insurance company, that one party (the principal) will fulfill a contractual obligation made to another party (the obligee). If the principal fails in that obligation, then the insurer is liable to pay a specified amount to the obligee or to find another means of satisfying the contract. If a municipality, for example, hires a contractor to build a bridge, then the contractor may be required by the municipality to purchase a surety bond that guarantees successful completion of the project.

At the Hartford, Stevens' role was to investigate surety claims submitted to the company and make final decisions on the disposition of those claims. Traveling extensively in his early years there, he would investigate the circumstances of a principal's failure to perform under a contract, verify that the obligee had lived up to all of its responsibilities under the contract, and then determine whether Hartford should deny the claim, assume responsibility for completing the project, or make a payment directly to the obligee.

In his travels, Stevens managed to find time for writing, although it wasn't always easy, as he wrote to his wife while on a business trip in 1920:

These cases are by far the most difficult and dangerous I have ever handled for the Company and I am determined to do as nearly perfect a piece of work on them as can be done. The cursed things are never out of my mind. ... I hopped into my bath and was lolling there when the telephone rang and I was under way for the day—floating on a Gulf Stream of talk with lawyers, contractors, dealers in cement, lumber, and so on. I have not had a poem in my head for a month, poor Yorick.

Stevens' literary tendencies were visible even in this brief letter, which contained both metaphor (the "Gulf Stream of talk") and allusion (to the line "Alas, poor Yorick" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). In fact, Stevens had published his first post-Harvard poem in 1914 and had begun submitting poems and short plays to *Poetry* magazine, one of which won him a prize in 1920. In 1923, his first book of poetry, titled *Harmonium*, was published. Now considered a classic of modernist verse, the book was not particularly well-received at the time, and it was certainly not a bestseller. "My royalties for the first half of 1924 amounted to \$6.70," Stevens wrote to one of his editors. "I shall have to charter a boat and take my friends around the world."

Following the birth of his daughter Holly in 1924, Stevens focused primarily on his insurance career for the next 10 years, while writing poetry only occasionally. Now the head of an expanded surety claims department, he was able to reduce his travel considerably, rarely leaving the home office except for an annual winter trip to Florida, which was a combination of business and vacation. These Florida trips often concluded with a stay in Key West, where Stevens would relax with his friend Judge Arthur Powell, an Atlanta lawyer who assisted the company with its claims in the South.

In 1934, Stevens was named a vice president at Hartford, making him one of the company's top officers. Around this time, he began writing poetry again in earnest, publishing *Ideas of Order* in 1935, *Owl's Clover* in 1936, and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* in 1937. His literary reputation grew, and he corresponded with other poets of the time, including Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams. He also encountered other writers while vacationing in Key West, as Judge Powell recalled.

One of my pleasantest experiences was at Key West, when [Stevens] and Robert Frost on two occasions came to my room, and under the kindly influence of small doses of the Georgia corn I dealt out to them, discussed each other's poetry and how each went about writing his own.

Peter Brazeau's "oral biography" of Stevens contains firsthand recollections from many of Stevens' coworkers at Hartford. Col-



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lectively, they paint the picture of a dedicated lawyer and claims man, exceedingly good at his job but also somewhat stern and eccentric. Manning W. Heard, whom Stevens hired as an assistant and who later became the chairman of the entire Hartford Insurance Group, recalled Stevens' style on the job:

Very seldom did we work together on a case. He had almost an unbroken rule that when he turned a case over to you, he expected you to handle it. He didn't even want to discuss it with you after that. Those files he gave to you, those files were in your hands.

He was a very imaginative claims man. I mean that he was never satisfied to handle cases entirely according to routine. One of the things in the old days was, if you had a contractor that defaulted, don't try to finish the contract; you'll lose your pants. Well, Stevens often violated that principle, and he finished contracts, and he was pretty successful. He was at the time and for many years before his death, the dean of surety-claims men in the whole country.

Stevens was a large man, standing well over 6 feet tall, and in between diets he could grow quite heavy. He never owned a car, and he walked extensively, commuting about 2 miles on foot to work each day. He took an additional walk most days at lunch, and many coworkers recalled his habit of brewing tea—which he had imported specially from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)—each afternoon at 3 o'clock on a gas range in the basement of the Hartford. For many years, Stevens also enjoyed smoking three cigars a day, a habit he dropped later in life.

Employees who worked under Stevens recalled his occasionally working on poetry at the office and often asking for assistance in researching the definitions of words used in either business correspondence or poems. While his colleagues admired his skill

at surety claims, most were less enthusiastic about his poetry. "His [business] letters were as clear as his poetry was obtuse," said Charles O'Dowd, an underwriter at the Hartford.

Certainly Stevens didn't intend his poems to be simple or accessible. Although his travels and daily activities often provided him with inspiration, his poems weren't in any sense *about* the specifics of his life or his surroundings.

For example, the titles of poems such as "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" relate to locations frequented by Stevens, but the poems themselves don't describe the locations or relate stories that occurred there. Rather, they address the ideas that each location inspired in the poet's imagination—the free-spirited song of a beachwalker contrasted with the regular rhythm of the wind and waves in Florida, for example, or the way in which a stolid city is transformed by the momentary and mysterious light of sunset.

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" is one of Stevens' finest and best-known poems, and its opening section illustrates his style:

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the selfsame sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna.

Of a green evening, clear and warm,
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders watching, felt

The basses of their beings throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.



Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

Wallace Stevens

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn
winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.
VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.
VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

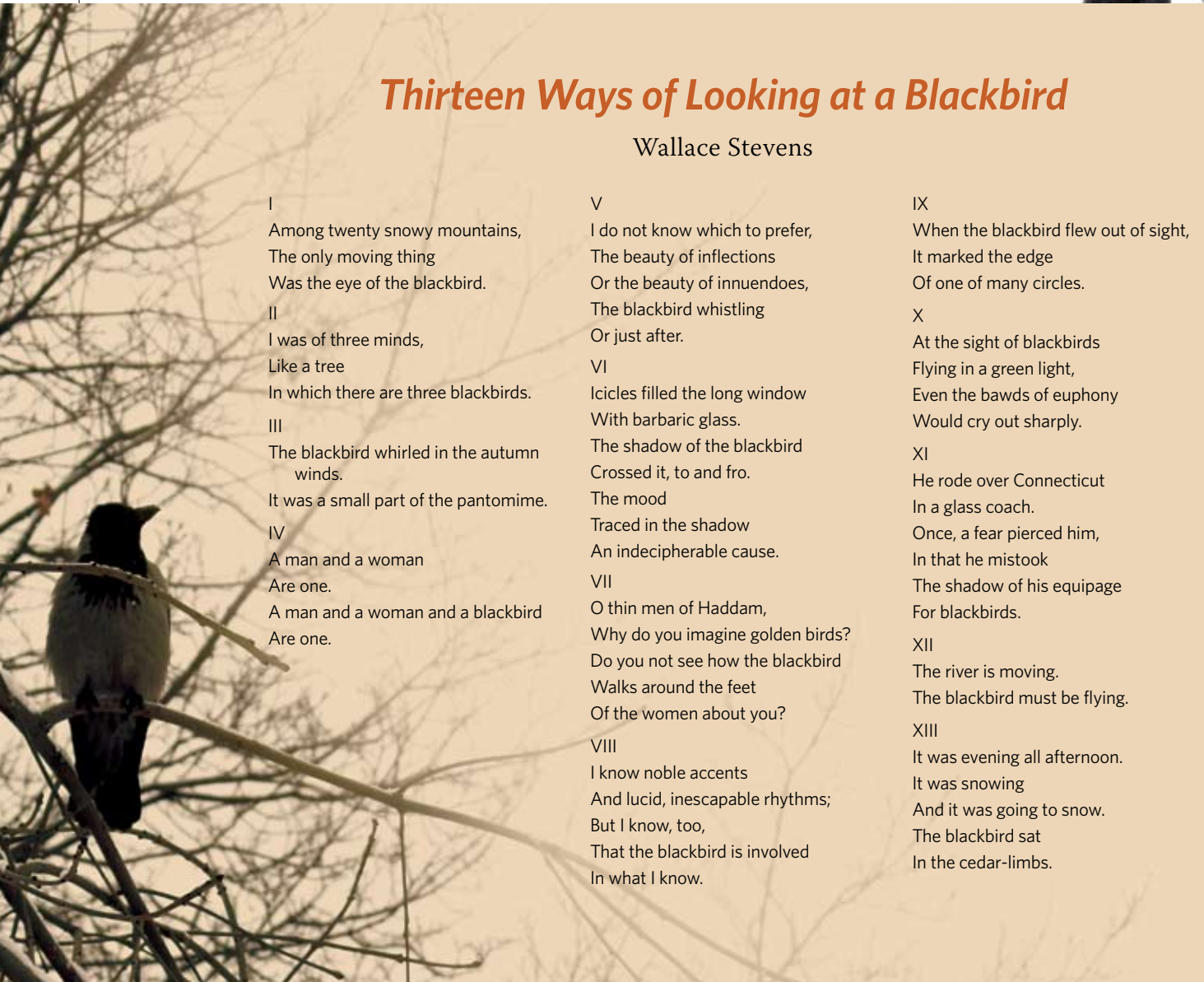
IX
When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII
It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.



YURY ASOTOW/ISTOCKPHOTO; ABOVE: OLEKSANDR KALYNA/ISTOCKPHOTO

The poem consists of the observations of Peter Quince, seated at his keyboard, admiring a beautiful woman. He is reminded of the story of Susanna and the elders, an apocryphal biblical tale, in which Susanna's beauty so arouses the elders that they attempt to prosecute the innocent woman for adultery.

These lines, like so much of Stevens' verse, are full of musical images. The importance of the music, however, isn't its literal sound, but its representation of the feelings of Quince and the elders. The distressing arousal of the elders, for example, is expressed in musical metaphors—it's not difficult to imagine what is signified by their throbbing basses or pulsing pizzicati. Stevens also uses colors, here and throughout his work, to represent moods and emotions: the cool blue silk, the lush green evening, and the nervous red eyes.

The literary allusions to Peter Quince (a character from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and Susanna are characteristic not only of Stevens but of modernist verse in general. Like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Stevens assumed his readers would have a high level of familiarity with such classical works. Although his poetry contains many beautiful verses that can be appreciated by casual readers, it wasn't written with a casual audience in mind.

In the later years of his life, Stevens gained significant respect

as an important literary figure. He received honorary degrees from numerous institutions and won several of the nation's major poetry awards, including the 1949 Bollingen Prize from Yale University and the 1955 Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, he continued his daily work at the Hartford, refusing to retire even after reaching the mandatory retirement age of 70 in 1949. When the 75-year-old Stevens was offered a prestigious appointment as the Charles Eliot Norton professor at Harvard by Archibald MacLeish in 1954, he immediately declined because of professional obligations:

The Hartford has a rule that fixes mandatory retirement at seventy. Although I am well beyond that age, I believe that I can keep on here as long as I want. To take the greater part of a year, however, for something else would be only too likely to precipitate the retirement that I want so much to put off. What is more I cannot imagine taking up the routine of the office again, at my age, after being away from it for a long period of time. These considerations, and others, leave me no choice. I can only decline your invitation with the greatest regret.

This remarkable letter, written less than a year before his death in 1955, illustrates his commitment to his profession. His fellow

Wallace Stevens Gets Out of the Office

WALLACE STEVENS TRAVELED TO FLORIDA as a businessman for the first time in 1922 and took two- to three-week winter trips there for the next 20 years, leaving the wife at home. His right hand broke on making contact with Hemingway's jaw at a hotel bar in Key West in 1936, so one assumes he came to feel like one of the boys while in the Sunshine State, not "mixing business and pleasure" so much as enjoying the pleasures of business. We also know he occasionally wrote poetry in Florida. There is no rift between businessman and poet—but there is a *between*. The senior lawyer, poring over files on surety bonds, spent his day minimizing risk and cutting the best deals for his company. Then, on an ordinary evening, he would go home to his desk and cut the best possible deals for himself.

Did he also minimize his personal risks, extending a rutted daily pattern into the night? "Even before Stevens began to specialize in surety bonds, he had the insurance lawyer's horror of uncalculated risk," Milton Bates claimed in his study of Stevens subtitled *A Mythology of Self*. In that case, Stevens miscalculated when swinging at Papa, though perhaps the gin was figuring the odds. My guess is that poetry for Stevens was essentially a more highly nuanced approach to ordering the always potentially unprofitable world of his workdays using similar tools, of language. He established, in an industrious American manner, that the thing at *greater* risk is always the poem, not the poet; the bankruptcy of a company is always a bigger story than the layoff of any one employee. (It's over for the poet soon enough.) He bragged about getting socked, overmatched and knocked down twice by a fa-

mous quasi-pugilist. It's been said that Key West was a symbol of the world Stevens felt compelled to control, to create order out of tropical havoc. In doing so, he disparaged the mere rendering of scenes or anecdotes which suggested to him a failing passivity. His gains would be fought for, through the willful illusions called supreme fictions. "The great conquest is the conquest of reality," goes one of his *Adagia*. "It is not enough to present life, for a moment, as it might have been."

Some of his peers took offense. "It is a pity that such a rich and special sensibility should be content with the order of worlds and music, and not project itself more vigorously upon the present-day world," wrote Theodore Roethke in 1936 about *Ideas of Order*.

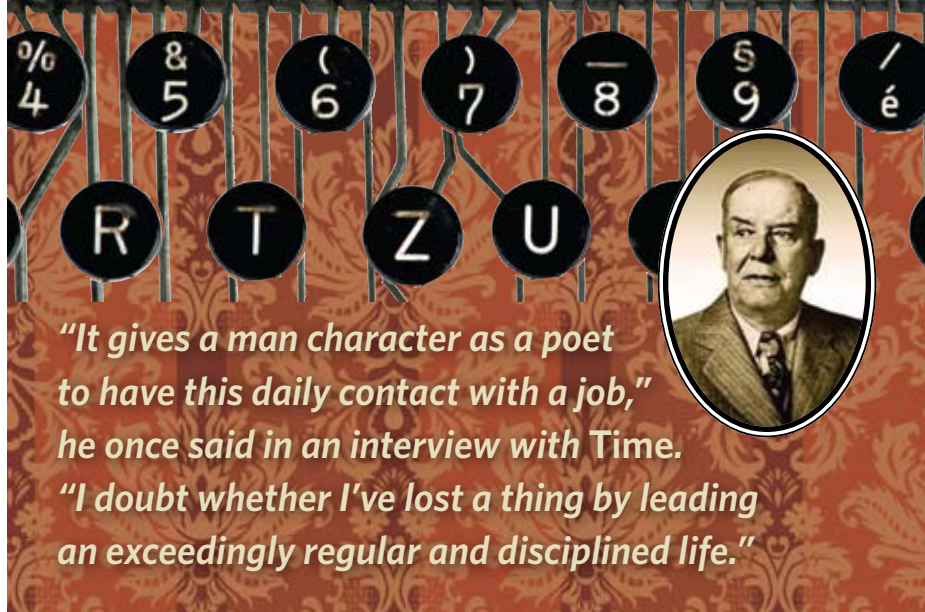
What first sounds like a demand for verisimilitude soon reveals itself as resentment for the very vigor that is supposedly missing. Since that time, most of the debate about Stevens has consisted either of celebrations or indictments of what is alternately described as selflessly liberating or selfishly insular. Stevens responded, "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words," and that was that.

Excerpted from Ron Slate's review of Green Squall by Jay Jopler in Blackbird (Vol. 6, No. 1, www.blackbird.vcu.edu). Slate is the author of The Incentive of the Maggot.

poets may have been perplexed by this commitment, but a study of his life reveals many reasons for his dedication. The simplistic view that he needed the money is, of course, partially true. Very few poets are able to support themselves without other sources of income, and Stevens wrote the least poetry during the years when financial and professional success was the most important to him—after his daughter was born in 1924 and before he was promoted to vice president in 1934. But the fact that he continued working past age 70, long after his financial security was assured and his literary reputation afforded him other lucrative options, means that this explanation doesn't suffice.

In truth, Stevens enjoyed his work at Hartford. He found it challenging and rewarding, and he enjoyed his reputation as the man who could resolve the most important and difficult claims. More important, however, he was a man of routine, and his routine for writing poetry depended directly on his routine for performing his profession. The rhythm of his daily walks to work, his midafternoon cups of tea, and his annual trips to Florida helped bring to life the colorful and musical world of his poetry.

"It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a



ALFRED WIMMER/THIS PULLES/ISTOCKPHOTO

job," he once said in an interview with *Time*. "I doubt whether I've lost a thing by leading an exceedingly regular and disciplined life." In fact, it was through that regular and disciplined life that Stevens gained the inspiration and creative mind-set to produce his finest work.

Wallace Stevens was a great poet, even if his poetry was incomprehensible to his insurance colleagues. He was also a great manager of surety claims, even if other poets couldn't understand why he went to work each day or what he did when he got there. Stevens didn't live two separate lives—or even one sharply divided life. His poetry and his insurance career were two closely related aspects of a brilliant and imaginative man.

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The quotations from Judge Powell, Manning Heard, and Charles O'Dowd are taken from Peter Brazeau's biography. The quotations from William Carlos Williams and *Time* are taken from James Longenbach's biography. The quotations from Stevens are taken from his *Collected Poems* and his published letters.

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