

CHARLES WYATT

from Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens

It is like a boat that has pulled away.

From the boat we see the land recede
and the harbor turn in a slow gesture
as our wake unfolds and we turn away—

And from the land we see the boat
become truer to the landscape, lakescape,
seascape, there a gull, there, the setting sun—

And cries of astonishment and applause
as it leaves behind one bright slice
broken free, sun bite, floating helplessly

until overtaken and lassoed by the boat,
and the boat, turning, steams or diesels
or sails toward shore where, waiting, we

stretch out our arms to the floating sun,
still yellow as gold and soft as a canary,
hissing and knocking sweetly as a boiling egg.

When, suddenly, the tree stood dazzling in the air.

Sometimes a wind, ignoring the other trees,
tousles the extreme upper branches like a hand
reaching down to pet a dog's head—a loose wind

rattling about in the heavens, lifting the birds
out of their trajectories, sifting through
the categories of birds, through all the bird

metaphors, word for word: a bird drank
at the stream, a bird struck its beak on the dead
branch, sound of sword, of struck branch,

but dazzling? The dazzling girl, my dazzling
thumb, a dazzling brace of trombones
hung from the branches of the tree, sudden

in their effect, chiming affably in the wind,
that loose French-speaking wind, scrambling
about the paper clips, the debonair trombones.

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A sovereign, a souvenir, a sign.

The way morning rules its moving light
leaves nothing to remember—birds
fly through it. Large and solitary bees

climb it carefully—there is no taste of bee,
nor bright sheen of sting, nor visitation
of spirit (angel, perhaps) equal to

the relief of sleep—toll it, then
sleep, bell—let it rock and bay,
give tongue to the rule of silence

and then slip away, past the growing
beanstalk set on revenge,
pot metal goose, tame ogre.

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There were ghosts that returned to earth.

All the ghosts of grasshoppers climbed the same stalk
and there made ratchet music one by one.

In a story, then, someone to listen, perhaps the third sister,
who took one in her apron, big as a cat, and home

with her the ghostly grasshopper ratcheting some
nonsense about a spell and a second sister, but

I am the third sister said the third sister, and
the grasshopper climbed down a stalk and down

its root into the ground and down and down he climbed
until he came to the shores of an empty sea and

was transformed into a prince or a bear the third
sister can't recall as she sits at the kitchen table

sipping tea made from magic beans, weedy tea,
fragrant as the inside of an old euphonium.

The wind had seized the tree, and ha, and ha.

And up with its roots, hey ho.
And off with its leaves, squirrel ho.
Why should we say the wind knows a tree,
blind wind, blundering, entangled

in its own brash and billowing song?
There's wind in a river and wind in a stone.
There's wind in the last burnt bell,
in the night, in the word that names the thing.

Take the sword or swing the stick.
Break the sword and break the stick.
And *ha* and *ho* say the song through.
The dogs will play and the wind will bray,

and the tree in stony silence lie fallen
feeling no calling to sing a *ha* or *ho*,
and the wind, long gone, has forgotten
the tree, neither flute nor guitar.

A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.

There is the sound of rising fifths on fifths.
The birds gathering over the whaleboat.
Its colors are blue and green *poco a poco*
crescendo.

There is the sound of pages turning by themselves.
All those sentences speaking to the empty room
until a single page holds still, giving a story *al*
niente.

And the room you've never visited, a passage somewhere
you've never followed, an indifferent door
which, opened, lets you hear the quiet fluttering
(andante)

of a thousand butterflies, mute, save for their wings,
which beat the air into a frothing cloud, and
there you stand, transfixed—from God's mouth . . .
(fine)

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Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.

The narrow stairway
turns on its turns,
and the light from upstairs,
the room with dancing

and airs sung lightly,
follows only faintly,
the stairs dim
and the walls dim,

and the scale, *l'escalier*,
descends until those bass notes
so far away and dark,
lap about our knees,

and the shadows that swim
there peer up, reminding
a music to turn itself around—
the steps ascend

like so many things,
a melody at once remembered—
there at the top,
like a bare branch—

and one bird
which will not sing,
and the door to the lit room
is stuck and will not open.

Silence is a shape that has passed.

In a procession, horses, elephants, the wagons
colorful, and the wheels spinning, it would seem,
backward, the little man with the broom

following, applause, acrobats, candy flung
and falling, children scrambling after
marching music, all the several shapes

of brass bells mouthing rhythms heartier
than these—and then the sidewalks empty,
even where a tired child sat down in revolt,

wanting to be carried high above and who
would not want such a thing even when silence
comes last, marching in close step

with paper blowing, the sky a single
unmoving cloud, drained of color—who
would not want to march in step,

to follow, and then around that distant corner
where the lamp post stands under its unlit globe,
vanish like a lizard running on the wall—