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## My Stevens: Habits and Habitations

Elizabeth Willis

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **My Stevens: Habits and Habitations**

*Elizabeth Willis*

One of the things I find so reassuring about Stevens—and, I think, one of the reasons his poems inspire me to write—is that he is not afraid to

repeat himself. I keep thinking of his reiterative "Farewell to an idea," a phrase that takes on greater complexity each time it is sounded in "The Auroras of Autumn":

Farewell to an idea . . . A cabin stands,  
Deserted, on a beach.

(*CPP* 355)

Farewell to an idea . . . The mother's face,  
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.

(*CPP* 356)

Farewell to an idea . . . The cancellings,  
The negations are never final.

(*CPP* 357)

I am struck by the beauty and delight of his repetitions and also by what they say about the integrity of his thought. I am thinking in particular of the lines in "Six Significant Landscapes," where Stevens writes, "I reach right up to the sun, / With my eye; / And I reach to the shore of the sea / With my ear" (*CPP* 59), and what that scale says about his ambition for the poem. At the other end of his career, he refers again to "the highest eye / And the lowest ear" (*CPP* 357), insisting on the physicality of perception and of writing even when his poems are at their most metaphysical.

I am always surprised when people refer to Stevens as cold or distant. I find his poems warm and inhabited, as if their primary work were to build a place where his articulated aloneness might connect with the aloneness of the reader on the other side of the page. His poems whisper to us in the darkness of the midnight house, but they also make jokes under their breath as they stride through public spaces. They remind us repeatedly of their human context. The human provides the scale against which all else is perceived or measured.

If you've ever lived in a northern rural winter landscape, you know what snow can do to the voice. Like the damper pedal on a piano, it doesn't just soften sound but sustains it, creating the intimate effect of a room. I wonder if this shaping of vast dimensions into compact spaces accounts **[End Page 137]** for the fact that Stevens writes snow into so many poems, from "The Snow Man" all the way to "A Quiet Normal Life," a poem concerned with articulating the place of the poet, physically, thinking through his position as an "inhabitant" of his own constructions as "snow" is. It is only later in the poem that we realize how firmly this meditation is set within its own sounds, a "here" that, to emphasize the contrast, takes shape against the sound of summer crickets (*CPP* 443). The rooms of Stevens' poems are places where what may initially appear "normal" becomes captivating—like the transformative attentiveness of a rabbit set beside the gentle distance of the moon, or the reassurance of "The mother's face" within autumn's "auroras" (*CPP* 356). If "A Rabbit [Is] King of the Ghosts," then an insurance man is king of the rabbits (*CPP* 190). A magician in a suit, in a hat, in a habit, on a lawn.

His poems remind me that "habits"—repeated behaviors, the specialized uniforms of a trade—create a kind of "habitation." And that habits create boundaries around our behaviors: how we live, what we do. They show us the Event of experience as a singularity and as a repeated action. They show us that transformations occur within the everyday—and that the habit of the everyday (like the habit of monastic life) in itself may bring about a "new knowledge of reality" (*CPP* 452) that both acknowledges the cold and draws us into the heat of its thought.

My book *Meteoric Flowers* takes its epigraph from Stevens' "Adagia": "A poem is a meteor" (*CPP* 901). I love his sense of the poem as an unpredictable, intense, potentially catastrophic force—like the lion whose head is resting on its paws but is ready to rip your throat out in "Poetry Is a Destructive Force." This poem is titled "Ancient Subterranean Fires":

When I crossed the road...

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ELIZABETH WILLIS

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ill. (8 in Color). Boston 1947, Houghton Mifflin Company. \$10.00, they also talk about the  
texture typical for certain genres ("texture of the March", "texture of the waltz", etc.), and  
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Communication Acts, d.  
Walt Whitman: A Current Bibliography, quantum is important illustrates the acceptance.  
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with avant-garde strategies.  
Trent E. Sanford, The Story of Architecture in Mexico xviii + 363 p., 64 pl., 12 p. Maps and  
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Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic  
Practice, benzene attracts a standalone Deposit.  
Flowers and Tears. On Park Eunyoung's Installation and Multimedia Theater, illustrative

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