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Imagery and the Impulse to Transcend in Poetry of Fred Alsberg

by Helen Maxson

I am not a poet. I do not have a poet's ear for the musical workings of verse. As a student and teacher of literature, I have always known that the significance of Phinny's death in *A Separate Peace*, and the ways the novel dramatizes that theme, are more readily apparent to me than are the traces of hymns in poems of Emily Dickinson, or their implications for her work. I have studied with professors who are gifted poets, and I knew as they lectured that I could never detect on my own the subtleties of music and meaning that appeared so vividly to them in the poems they were discussing. With my own students, I have likened the writing of poetry to the writing of music. We have wondered together where Mozart got his material — from what area or quality of his mind — and then considered poetry as a similar medium.

Still, two aspects of poetry, both of them part of its music but also distinct from it, have always been eloquent for me: first, the reliance on imagery that poetry shares with fiction, and second, poetry's greater ability to aspire beyond the here and now, beyond the mundane realm critics have long seen as the special province of fiction. My taste for the transcendent (whether shown most clearly by a love of the choral music reflecting centuries of religious faith or by involvement in the political protests of the 1960s) has drawn me to the poems of Wallace Stevens, whose career was devoted to embracing and transcending the limitations of this world, and whose work has been as powerful for me as any novel. Perhaps my affinities for Stevens and novels are linked in part by his belief that poetry must embrace anything it seeks to transform before the transformation can take place, grafting a dialogue between that process and its everyday starting point. Perhaps its inherent involvement

with the data of the senses gives poetry no choice but to embrace the here and now, as do Stevens's elegant birds that "sink / Downward to darkness on extended wings" in "Sunday Morning," and his "listener, who listens in the snow," seeking winter's beauty in "The Snowman." Perhaps readers of novels can see poetry in no other way.

I have enjoyed the poems of Fred Alsberg in part because several explore the impulse to transform or depart from one's physical nature or environment, making them good tests for Stevens's perspective and making that perspective a good source of insight on the poems. There is an Eastern or Asian flavor to these poems; in several, one moves toward a higher state of being that involves some distant or unitary point of origin, some primal emptiness preceding the clutter of worldly forms, or both. In one poem, a man with "lemur eyes" imagines himself passing backwards in evolutionary history "through bellies of birds and fish, / through shells and smaller shells and smaller still," to "a single cell," and from there to "a sea that breaks upon nothingness / where Buddha came to sit and rest" ("Emptying the Mirror"). In another poem, a car frees itself from a tight, snow-covered parking space and "leaves a black space its own shape" behind; a few lines later, "people walk free of their footprints," and all things float suspended in a snow storm "as though underwater" ("Paperweight"). In "Roadside," a caged mountain lion sits "motionless" in the back of a pickup, surrounded by curious people on the side of the interstate; it stares into the distance, effectively escaping the humiliation of its confinement. In another poem, a father teaches his daughter to fold up the darkness that is frightening her, filling it gradually and completely with a light in which "nothing hurtful



can hide" ("Bedtime"). In another, a beachcomber collects treasures from the sand and then closes his eyes, letting the "peach-colored glow" he sees give way ultimately to a "glare" that "would otherwise / have made him look away" ("Beachcomber"). All these poems depart from the familiar world to a transcendent state which seems somehow higher, purer, and less-constricting.

Often the journey to transcendence in Alsberg's poems follows a guide or pathway. The child follows the caring instructions of her father in picking "any speck of light" to magnify, diminishing the darkness around it. The beachcomber follows the "mica shimmer / of a pathway" to a brightness that only the path's approach could enable him to face. The poems I have mentioned all depict some carefully detected starting point, the locus of some process that will lead to a higher plane. Similarly, in the poem "Daydreamer," a geography student follows the rise and fall of a leaf on currents of air outside the classroom window, coming to the jungles, wildlife, and ancient ruins his imagination adds to his teacher's lesson. Again, the flavor is Eastern, the images suggesting the path of Enlightenment a Buddhist might follow.

But the notions of a guide, a pathway, a guiding star or leaf, emphasize the physical world one leaves behind in finding enlightenment, and these poems celebrate that world as well as its transcendence. One poem, entitled "Beginning the

Modern-day Odyssey," laments a failed journey of the imagination. The poet had sat down to write, and wasted "perfectly good / pieces of paper" to discover that his muse, his guide on the pathway to imaginative success, would fail him: "The sky, it would seem, / had closed up shop; / I'd need to be content / to rule out a few dead ends." Ironically, it is vivid and imaginative imagery that describes what the blocked poet could not achieve. He "could no longer hear / the breeze unsheathe its blade." He could not "play chess with headstones."

He could not "do a tap dance / on typewriter keys." As he ironically lists the inspired images he could not create, the poet describes as well the world in which he writes. In his work, the world and its poetic transformation are closely allied.

The poem "Daydreamer" goes as far in the same direction as to locate its higher plane in a dense, lush jungle world, though that context is distanced from the student by its imaginary nature, ancientness, and geographical location. Still, it is the immediate world of school that is empty of worldly forms, the map drawn down by the geography teacher, as removed from the terrain it represents as the charts of Whitman's learned astronomer are removed from the stars. It is the plenitude of jungles and stars themselves, not abstractions from them, that can impress and educate.

More often, though, Alsberg depicts the higher plane as an uncluttered place, letting material



things suggest confinement in an untransformed world that keeps asserting itself as a poem reaches beyond it. The sheer weight, massiveness, and power of the caged mountain lion, conveyed more by its juxtaposition to the trivial t-shirts and sunglasses surrounding it than by direct description, are very much foregrounded by the poem, as are its tan, wide, staring eyes. In "Paperweight," the tight parking space makes the car's ultimate exit all the more freeing. Furthermore, it is the containment of fluid—not its transcendent release—that allows the people and objects in the paperweight to float free of their footprints; if the fluid itself were to float free like the "sea that breaks upon the nothingness / where Buddha came to sit and rest," its magic would be undone. The weighing down of paper and, in the poem about writer's block, the use of "perfectly good pieces of paper" to rule out obstructing dead ends: these material, restrictive aspects of the untranscended world are prominent in the work of escaping it.

It is not only imagery that embraces the world in these poems, but also narrative tones like humor. A small boy's "wriggling fingers" invade the mountain lion's cage. Comparatively trivial, careless, and annoying, they offer a distressing and very funny conclusion to the situation described, as does the sudden shattering of the geography student's daydream by the "well-aimed, blackboard eraser."

Similarly, the tender concern of the father for his frightened daughter evokes, along with fatherhood in general, the world we know as ours.

Still, their images provide these poems' firmest grip on the immediate world, in its various stages of change. Images like the fishtailing car and people walking free of their footprints in "Paperweight," and the "lemur eyes" in "Emptying the Mirror" engage the senses in much the same way as do the romanticized radish and the other images withheld from the frustrated poet by the closed sky in "Beginning the Modern-day Odyssey." Even as the frustrated poet wistfully enumerates the images he cannot create, the narrator of "Emptying the Mirror" enumerates each stage of his journey toward nothingness, his imagery giving substance to all material things along the way, including the mystical "water that mends without a scar." The absence in this image is a physical presence that helps locate the vision of the poem in some dialogue between the otherworldly and the here and now. Like the "lemur eye[d]" old man whose return to the birth of the race is triggered by a book he holds in his hands, and like the beachcomber who must gather driftwood before he can enter the realm of light, the author of these poems collects the images he wants to leave behind, enacting a goal of lyric poetry with a strategy of stories.

