CHAPTER 1

Reading, Pennsylvania

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Reading: the place Stevens called home for the first third of his life, and the fictive Reading he kept returning to in his poetry as he grew older. "I lost a world when I left Reading" (*L* 98) he confessed when he was twenty-eight. It was a place he continued to revisit for decades after, though it would never be the same Reading again for him. Reading: Pennsylvania Dutch country and the seat of Berks County, population 43,000 in 1879 – the year Stevens was born.[1] It was an industrial city, railroad engine smoke and noise filling the valley day after day. Yet it was also a place with country roads and the majestic Mt. Penn. It was his home, his native place, where he swam and basked in the sun along the locks of the Schuylkill, or rode and crashed his bicycle, or hopped trains with the local gang to ride through the countryside, lobbing stolen corn at the farms before retreating through the fields and disappearing (*L* 125).

He would spend the first twenty years of his life in the same mid-nineteenth-century three-story red brick row house at 323 North Fifth Street, this second child (and second son) born to Margaretha Catharine (Kate) Zeller and Garrett Barcalow Stevens. Both parents were descended from early Dutch-German immigrants who had settled in Pennsylvania well over a century earlier. Kate was a native of Reading, born in 1848, the daughter of Sarah Frances Kitting and John Zeller, a shoemaker who had died when Kate was thirteen, forcing her to quit school and work to help support her mother, brothers, and sisters with her schoolteacher's salary. Stevens's father, Garrett, was born that same year on a farm eighty miles east of Reading in Feasterville, Pennsylvania, one of six children born to Elizabeth Barcalow and Benjamin Stevens. At seventeen he had left home to begin teaching, and in 1872 moved to Reading to become a lawyer. He married Kate on November 9, 1876, in the First Presbyterian Church, which Kate and her parents regularly attended (*L* 3–5).[2]

In December 1877, their first child, Garrett, Jr., was born, either at 307 North Fifth, where Garrett and Kate first lived, or a few row houses to the

north at 323 North Fifth, where the Stevenses would live out their lives together. It was here, over the next dozen years, that the other Stevens children were born: Wallace on October 2, 1879, followed by John in 1880, Elizabeth in 1885, and Mary Katharine in 1889. The children were all named after family members, except for Wallace, who was apparently named for George Wallace Delamater, a successful banker and insurance executive and a prominent leader of the Republican Party.[3] Wallace would remember his mother reading from the Bible to him and his siblings each night before bed, or sitting in the parlor on Sunday evenings with her children around her, playing the piano and singing old Christian hymns, or strolling about on market days, speaking with the farmers' wives in that strange Pennsylvania Dutch idiom of theirs (*L* 172–3).

In the fall of 1884 Wallace began attending school, at first the one attached to the First Presbyterian Church, then the school attached to St. John's Evangelical Lutheran, more high church and more in the Stevenses' German Lutheran tradition, and a few streets closer to home.[4] Often relatives showed up in Reading: his mother's sisters or his father's older wealthy bachelor brother, Uncle James Van Sant Stevens (*L* 126 and note). Wallace was called Wal or Pat then, and he spent his summer vacations with his brothers at their paternal grandparents' farmstead in Feasterville until Wallace was fourteen. After that, he and his brothers vacationed in Ephrata, where he played cards, shot pool, sang alto in an all-male barbershop quartet, and became interested in girls (*L* 5–7, 125–6). Then, in the summer of 1896 the three brothers began spending their summers on the farm at Ivyland near Feasterville with their Aunt Mariah and Uncle Isaac (*L* 8–10).

In the fall of 1892, Wallace entered Reading Boys' High School, which his brothers both attended. He took Latin and Greek, the highlights of the English literary tradition, grammar and composition, geography, Greek history, algebra, and arithmetic. He played left end for the school's football team, and poker with his classmates for Lucifer matches and cigarettes (*L* 125–6). Garrett was more ethereal, while John was as tough as Wallace. Just a year apart, the two younger brothers were at each other's throats all through their high school years. And when Wallace fell ill with malaria, which permanently impaired the hearing in his left ear and left him incapacitated for so long that he had to repeat ninth grade, he and John found themselves in the same class for four years, each trying to outdo the other. It was a blessing of sorts, because until then Wallace had been content to merely coast along, and now he felt the need to outshine his younger

brother. Still, it was John who would care for their father after he suffered a nervous breakdown, and John who cared for his mother and sisters after their father died. He would remain in Reading all his life, practicing law and eventually becoming boss of the Democratic Party for Berks County.[5]

Because of his boyhood illnesses, Wallace spent the school year (1892–3) with his Aunt Mary Louise Zeller and her husband, the Bavarian-born Reverend Henry Baptiste Strodach, along with their son, Paul, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where Strodach served as pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church (*L* 6n). When Stevens returned to Reading Boys' High in the fall of '93, he was a changed young man, serious enough about his studies that he was soon near the top of his class. He devoured Poe and Hawthorne and the classics – what he called "all the things one ought to read" (*L* 125) – and discovered he had a penchant for writing, eventually becoming the editor of the school newspaper, *Dots and Dashes* (959). He also donned a white surplice and black cassock on Sundays and sang – first as soprano, then as alto – in the choir of Christ Episcopal (*L* 126). In 1896, his senior year, he won an essay contest sponsored by the *Reading Eagle.* That Christmas he delivered an oration titled "The Greatest Need of the Age," earning a gold medal and a sketch of himself in the pages of the *Eagle* (*L* 13n). When he graduated from Reading High in June 1897, the school chose him to deliver the valedictory oration. He called it "The Thessalians," and challenged his classmates to hold true to their deepest Christian values if they were ever to realize their true manifest destiny. "Let every arm, let every breast," he closed, "let every man defend the cross forever" (755).[6]

Soon after he arrived at Harvard in the fall of 1897, Stevens was sending his poems home for his mother's perusal, and getting back chatty letters from his father, who was paying his son's yearly tuition of $150 as well as tuition for his other two sons. Practical-minded, and under financial pressures himself, Garrett urged Wallace not to waste time on poetry (*SP* 71). Better to focus on what led to practical results, for that meant money in the bank. But by the end of his first year at Harvard, Wallace had donned a Harvard manner and a way of speaking that did not go over well back in Reading. And when he told his father that he wanted to be a journalist rather than a lawyer like his father and brothers, Garrett tried to understand by helping him find work that summer of 1898 on the *Reading Times*.[7]

The following summer Wallace was back at the family farm at Ivyland, filled with ideas for new sonnets. He wrote in his journal about nature: a blue heron flying along a creek, a catbird singing in the rain, as well as

about chaste young maidens in dim towers, though it was far better to give oneself to one's poems rather than women, because nature asked for so little in return for one's attention (*L* 30–2).

In June 1900, having graduated from Harvard, Stevens moved to New York City. His father, however, had recently suffered a financial reversal with the failure of his real estate investments and his bicycle company, which led to a nervous breakdown and a six-month rest cure in Saranac, New York. So, after a brief stint as a newspaper reporter in New York, Wallace – like his father and brothers – took up law, though he had no intention of ever setting up a law practice in Reading.

After passing his New York bar exams in June 1904, he visited Reading once again. It was then that he met the eighteen-year-old Elsie Viola Kachel, who had grown up just a few streets from his own home, and fell head over heels for her. Elsie lived with her mother, stepfather, and half sister at 231 South Thirteenth Street, which meant she was (literally) from the wrong side of the tracks that divided Reading several blocks to the east of the Stevenses' home. At thirteen, she had had to leave school to help support her family, selling sheet music in a local department store and offering piano lessons at home. At eighteen, she was still shy and awkwardly self-conscious. But she was also beautiful (enough so that her profile would adorn the American dime and half dollar from 1916 until 1946), and she caught Stevens's attention from the start. If she needed to be educated, Stevens, with his Harvard degree and book-learning and fresh law degree, would educate her.

From his dingy lower Manhattan apartment Stevens wrote Elsie almost daily. No wonder that, when he returned to Reading now, he found himself more and more uncomfortable among "the worn, the sentimental, the diseased, the priggish and the ignorant" (*L* 82) he had grown up among, certainly compared to Elsie. And if his Protestant upbringing fell short of what he felt he needed, he would create his own philosopher's circle, a salon made up of figures like "Mary Stuart, Marie Antoinette, George Sand, Carlyle, Sappho, Lincoln, Hawthorne, Goethe and the like" (*L* 82), refining his fantasies to include interior Matisse-like spaces with green cockatoos on a rug.

He visited Elsie as often as he could, traveling with her on outings by horse and wagon as far as Strausstown and Womelsdorf. Finally, after five years of courtship, he and Elsie were married on September 21, 1909, in Reading's Grace Lutheran, though none of Stevens's family attended.[8] After a brief honeymoon the couple returned to New York, where Stevens now worked in the surety branch of the insurance business. During the

summers, because of New York's intense heat, Elsie returned to stay with her mother and sister in Reading, while Stevens remained behind in New York, working. Estranged though he was from his parents because of their refusal to accept Elsie, Stevens did return to Reading for his father's funeral, and visited with his mother until her death a year later (*L* 172–3, 175). When his sister Katharine died as a result of meningitis while serving as a Red Cross nurse in post-war France and was buried with her parents in Reading, a shaken Stevens returned to visit her grave (*L* 212–13). Now, to his ambivalent feelings about Reading, was added a sense of the sacred, something only the heart could understand.

When, in the autumn of 1938, his brother Garrett died of heart failure at the age of sixty in Cleveland, Stevens, though he had supported Garrett's family with checks, did not attend the funeral.[9] But the loss of his older brother, whom he had refused to see even when Garrett had lived in New York during Stevens's time there, struck Stevens deeper than he had until then been willing to acknowledge. The following July he was back in Reading, this time for the funeral of his younger brother, John, who had died from ulcer complications. It was then that he had a chance to mingle with nephews and nieces he had never met. One in particular, his sister Elizabeth's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Jane [MacFarland], delighted him. So, when he learned that Elizabeth had been unable to attend the funeral because of her health, he decided to accompany Jane back to Philadelphia and see his sister for the first time in twenty-five years. If he was ever going to reunite with his family, that time was now.[10]

In the summer of 1941, in his sixty-second year, Stevens began researching his genealogy in earnest. And though he had once pooh-poohed his mother's interest in her Dutch roots, he wrote now to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to ascertain what they knew about his mother's ancestors.[11] What also spurred him on was his wife's interest in her own background, since her ancestors included several prominent historical figures at least as important as Stevens's own ancestry.[12] Only his sister Elizabeth – whom he would lose soon enough – and Garrett's widow remained from his own generation now: ghostly reminders of an imaginary Booth Tarkington/Currier and Ives youth to be meditated on in the dark solitudes of his Hartford study.

And if his only child, Holly, had little interest in the Reading relatives she had never known, and his wife had little to do with the family that had rejected her long ago, those Reading ghosts loomed larger and larger for Stevens himself. And when Elizabeth died in February 1943, Stevens alone was left to tell their story. Following her funeral, he returned to Reading

with his nieces, Elizabeth's daughter, Jane, and Anna May, the wife of John Jr., who was now serving with the Army Tank Corps in Hawaii.[13]

When Stevens visited Reading again that May, he at last learned from the minister of the local Dutch church the name of his mother's grandfather. It was John Zeller, Jr., which meant that his great-grandfather had to have been John Zeller Sr., or – as he called him in a poem – "Old John Zeller" (287), who, it turned out, had sired nine children. For another year, that was all Stevens could find out about his ancestor. Then, in May 1944, the genealogist Stevens had hired came across a reference to John Zeller's grave in the churchyard of St. Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church in Amityville, twelve miles east of Reading. It lay buried under bramble, the name half-erased, so that Stevens lost no time in having the site cleared and the gravestone reset.

Old John Zeller, it turned out, had been born during the Revolutionary War and had spent his boyhood on a farm in the Tulpehocken area of Berks County, where that Zeller's father had settled back in the 1720s, after fleeing from his home in the Palatinate to avoid persecution by the Catholics. After Old John married, he and his wife, Catherine, had moved to Philadelphia, where he had made his living as a shoemaker before moving to the Valley of Oley, where he died in 1858 at the age of seventy-nine. That trade the father had passed on to his own son, John Jr., for Stevens remembered how his mother had insisted that her father had been a maker of fine boots.[14]

But what, really, did he know about his mother's grandfather besides a few facts like birth and death dates, places where Old John had lived, and the location of an abandoned grave in a churchyard a dozen miles from where he had grown up, beyond a "structure of ideas" composed of the "ghostly sequences / Of the mind" (287)? It was easy enough of course to wish it otherwise,

> to wish for another structure
> Of ideas and to say as usual that there must be
> Other ghostly sequences and, it would be, luminous
>
> Sequences, thought of among spheres in the old peak of night.
> (287)

But was that not what his genealogical venture had turned out to be: "a habit of wishing, as if one's grandfather lay / In one's heart and wished as he" – both the poet and the old man – "had always wished," and yet "unable // To sleep in that bed for its disorder"? (287) What difference was there, finally, between Old John Zeller – unable to sleep even in death unless he could communicate something of himself to his great-grandson –

and his great-grandson at sixty-five, tossing in his own bed in Hartford, likewise "talking of ghostly / Sequences" (287)? At least Old John would have been content to accept the world as it had been – a world composed of shoe leather, taxes, his children's teeth, church services, the cold coming in under the door sill – rather than preoccupy himself as Stevens had with his never-ending questions about the structure of ideas, when – in the end – all structures inevitably blended into the oblivion of death.

In late 1944 John Stevens, Jr., and his wife Anna May drove Stevens to visit the actual grave of Old John Zeller.[15] That visit turned out to be one of Stevens's last to Reading. By then he had gleaned what he could from the younger generation, and events had shown him that even the best of the Stevenses, himself included, were as vulnerable as anyone to the misfortunes of ignoble choice. In September 1946, Wallace and Elsie spent a leisurely month at the Hotel Hershey, an hour west of Reading, with his old friend, Judge Powell, and Powell's wife, during which time Stevens "crisscrossed" the area once again with a local genealogist. This time, however, Stevens had come to find Reading as unbearable as ever, so that he left without visiting any of his relatives.[16]

As sole survivor of the family, then, it was left to him to restore his father. His father "wasn't a man given to pushing his way" he had come to understand. "He needed what all of us need, and what most of us don't get . . . discreet affection." He saw now that he was like his father in being "incapable of lifting a hand to attract any of us, so that, while we loved him . . . we also were afraid of him, at least to the extent of holding off. The result was that he lived alone." He was glad to have the photograph of his father his niece had found, for it showed his father at a time when he still looked hopeful. And yet looking at photographs of his family was like observing people who "come into the world, live for a while and then go out of it again" (*L* 454, 458). Time then to try and forget the unfortunate things that had happened and think kindly of his family.

Besides, perhaps he had come to understand his father better than his father had ever understood himself. "Had he been more selfish than he was," Stevens summed things up, instead of working so hard to see his children succeed, no doubt things might have been different (*L* 454). Why, then, visit Reading anymore, haunted as it was with "unimportant ghosts whom I could not understand, since they would be certain to talk to us in Pennsylvania Dutch"? (*L* 507–8) And what would they have to talk about anyway? The damage the rain had done to the wheat and hay?

In his late long poem, "Credences of Summer" (1947), Stevens reimagined Reading as a place unchanged in the amber light of memory's

imagination. Once more, it was the old dilemma of wanting to hold on to what he could not. And yet, here he was, returning in his imagination to the Reading of his courtship years and to Mount Penn,

> the natural tower of all the world . . .
> A point of survey squatting like a throne,
> Axis of everything, green's apogee
>
> And happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns.
> (323)

Reading, then, as a place where the mind might rest at ease, as in a bedroom in Hartford, a "refuge that the end creates," a world where a man might stand atop a tower, a large Red Man from Reading, who has read and read, but whose eyes tired easily now, so that he spent the passing hours looking out on the world about him, absorbing "the ruddy summer . . . appeased, / By an understanding that fulfils his age, / By a feeling capable of nothing more" (323) because there was nothing more to desire. A picnic with Elsie, the two of them lying side by side on a midsummer's day in the countryside of Oley, among the piled mows, a world that no longer was, where "the secondary senses of the ear" swarmed not just with the sounds of cicadas and orioles, crickets and blue birds, but with the "last choirs, last sounds / With nothing else compounded, carried full" (323–4). Call it a fable of summer, then, where, "Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs" of summer, where some deep desire was realized and a woman finally won (325).

And then the dream of summer's credences unraveling, where the Gardener who had designed that garden was gone now, the Garden itself merely a field of "salacious weeds," where the "personae of summer" existed only in the imagination, leaving an old man to meditate on "gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night," where people he had once known intimately spoke in a language he could not understand, and wore "the moodiest costumes" of forty years ago. Reading, then, become "Part of the mottled mood of summer's whole," where the inhabitants, those "roseate characters" seemed safe for a moment

> from malice and sudden cry,
> Completed in a completed scene, speaking
> Their parts as in a youthful happiness.
> (326)

In that world, he confessed in his late poem, "The Auroras of Autumn," "We thought alike / And that made brothers of us in a home / In which we fed on being brothers" (362). But, alas, wasn't it true that in the end he had dreamed his life away, stuck in the honey of sleep, aware of the

inevitable where only two things were real: the poet and the imagination, boon companion and mother of his poems. "When you are young," he wrote his niece in 1950, "you look back to returning home. But when you become my age and go home you don't know anybody any longer" (*L* 674). By then, he had come to see, a whole new generation of Stevenses – nieces and nephews and their children – inhabited Reading, folks who, if they thought at all about *his* generation – thought about them as nameless ghosts haunting sepia-tinted photographs on a wall.

NOTES

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reading,_Pennsylvania.
2 See also Thomas Francis Lombardi, *Wallace Stevens and the Pennsylvania Keystone: The Influence of Origins on His Life and Poetry* (Susquehanna: Susquehanna University Press, 1996), pp. 23–9.
3 James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 16.
4 St. John's Lutheran, 521 Walnut Street, is a five-minute walk from the Stevenses' home. Wallace began attending school here in the fall of 1885 (959).
5 Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 254–6, 263, 266–8, 280.
6 George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 10–12.
7 Lombardi, *The Influence of Origins*, p. 53.
8 Many years later Elsie wrote a terse note remembering that painful day: "We were married by the Rev. William H. Myers, in the Grace Lutheran church in Reading, attended by the bride's parents and two bridesmaids, Miss Anna Rigg, and Miss Mary Stoner." Cf. Lensing, *A Poet's Growth*, p. 44.
9 Brazeau, *Parts of a World*, p. 266.
10 Brazeau, *Parts of a World*, pp. 266–8.
11 Lombardi, *The Influence of Origins*, p. 99.
12 Lensing, *A Poet's Growth*, p. 41.
13 Brazeau, *Parts of a World*, pp. 266–8, 279.
14 Cf. Stevens's letters to various genealogists, *L* 399–400, 415, 417, 448, 455–6, 467, 469–70, 782.
15 Brazeau, *Parts of a World*, pp. 279–80.
16 Brazeau, *Parts of a World*, p. 285.