

# The Poetry of Wallace Stevens' Secretary

by Con Chapman

*Then he would on occasion give Marguerite Flynn, his secretary, a note for her to type. And she would be the only person who could possibly decipher his handwriting.*

*Hale Anderson, Jr., colleague of Wallace Stevens at The Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company*

*[H]e was rather a forbidding character, given to sudden, unreasonable and unpredictable fits of temper and criticism. (. . .) It wasn't until about 1941 that I went to work directly as his secretary, except for times when his then secretary, who had a temper of her own to match his, would walk out on him, but of course, the final flare-up came and she didn't return to the company.*

*Marguerite Flynn*



What in the name of God's green earth does this say? "Chifferobe if you can of Aztec in coffee can"? That makes no more sense than God gave a goose. And he doesn't pay me enough to figure it out. I'm going to have to—ahem—"improvise." It's a quarter to twelve, if I don't get down to Slagle's right at noon time all the popovers will be gone. Let's see, if I were a crazy Republican would-be poet surety bond lawyer, I'd write something like *this*:

*Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan.*

Hmm. Wonder if that's not a little too—obvious. Well, if he doesn't like it he can mark it up and hand it back to me for re-typing. Like he always does, unless he's had too many martinis, in which case it's always "That will do do do, what I write is the personal." He never makes any goddamn sense to me.

Okay, one down, nine to go. "Often with her unbuckles, halt!" Who does he think he is—James Joyce?" Maybe . . . no, couldn't be. How about "*Of tan with henna hackles, halt!*" Close enough for poetry. Wonder if he's going to give me something besides the measly bonus I get from "The Hartford" every year. Would it kill him to slip me a fiver every decade or so? Maybe it would—who would miss him?



Buck up, girlie. What's next? "*Dumb universal cusp, as if the sun/Was blackened to beat your bloody tail*"? Okay, now *that's* a line to stir the hearts and minds of sentimental souls. Why don't I exercise a little "poetic license" and make it "*Damned universal cock, as if the sun/Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.*" Is that pouring it on too thick? I don't think so.

Whadda we got here: "*Fart! Fart! Fart! Fart!/I smell perpetual.*" Well, he does get a little fragrant when he has the fish cakes and beans at Slagles. For his own sake, for his reputation among the Hartford bar, I'd better tone that down a bit. Now on to "*Your would it you—I am the egg man.*" I wonder if I should report him to Human Resources—he *must* be on drugs. Let's try "*Your world is you. I am my world.*" Has a nice ring to it.

Okay, nose to the grindstone: "*You tenderfoot poem among Rieslings. Fart!*" Maybe that's the problem—too much German wine. How about we try "*You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!*" There—*much* better.

"*Begone! An isthmus brushes its three fangs.*" You know, I may be just a secretary, but I know crappy poetry when I see it. I mean, nonsense is fine—Edward Lear and all that—but even nonsense has to make *some* sense. Backspace, backspace: "*Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines.*"



There—that's the ticket. What time is it? Five to twelve! Gotta hurry, so here goes nothing:

*Bristol, and ports theme Appalachian fangs,  
And foams not partly Ashcan nor his hose.*

Honestly, I don't see how The Hartford can put so much trust in such a loony bird. Wonder if I should get a rabies shot?

C'mon—think, dammit! Is there some kind of theme, some pattern here? Or just the raving howls at the moon of a senile old man? Oh

well, maybe if I just re-arrange some of the letters nobody will notice. Nobody notices poetry anyway, but maybe if it's crazy enough he'll think he was seized by the divine afflatus and churned out something like—

*Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,  
And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos.*

Christ, I meant “hoots.” Where's the damn eraser, I just had it in my hand . . .

Oh hello, Mr. Stevens. Yes, I just finished your poem—here it is.

